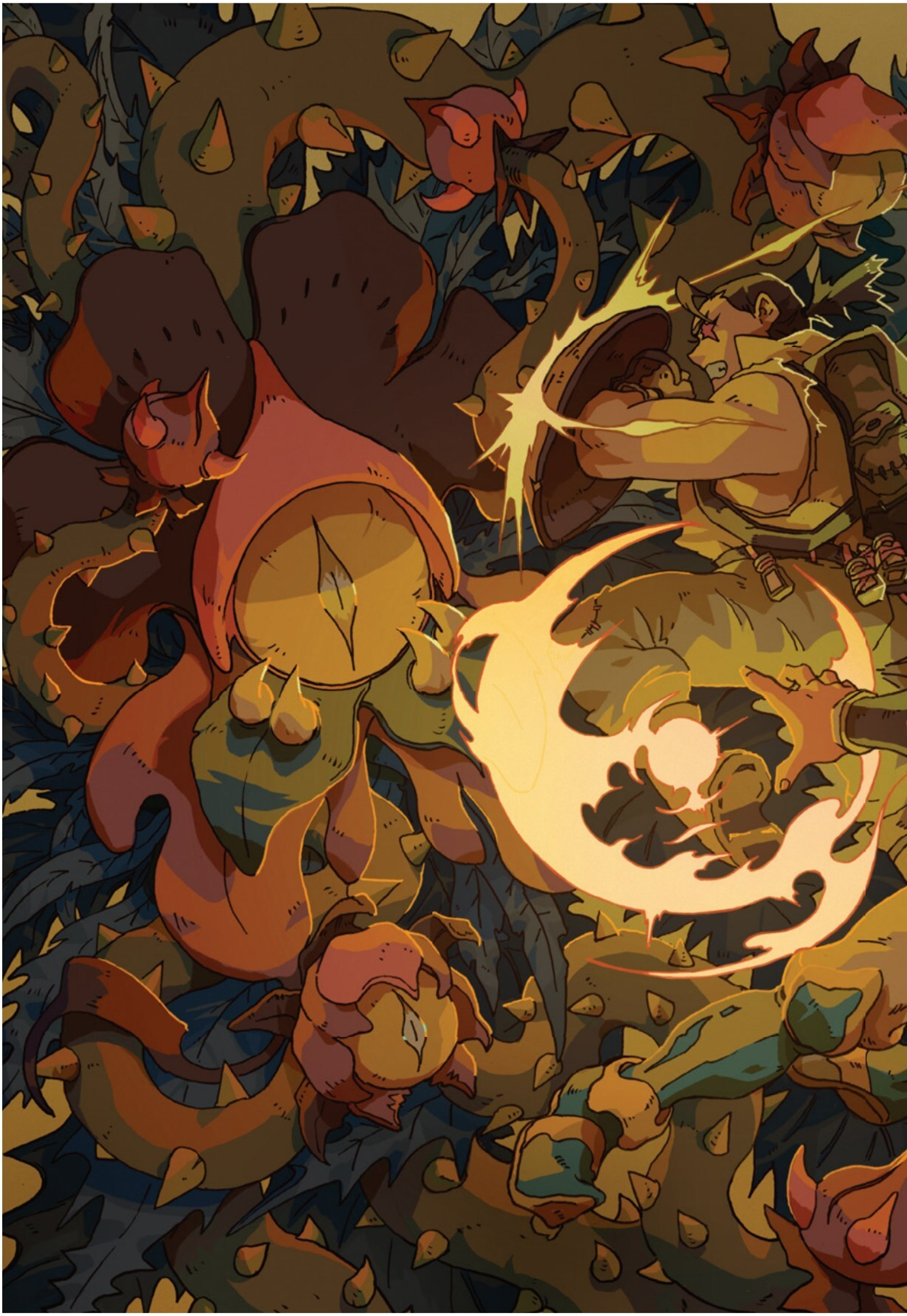
GAMEINFORMER

the INDIE issue featuring

Sea of Stars



↙
We have two covers for Sea of Stars. The standard cover shows the Solstice Warriors, Valere and Zale, along with their friend Garl, moving through the Forbidden Cavern while carefully avoiding monsters. The artwork for our Gold cover (pictured here) shows the same team embroiled in combat with the Botanical Horror boss in the Haunted Mansion.

Art by Bryce Kho

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE INDIE SUCCESS STORY

LONGTIME READERS of *Game Informer* may recall a magazine section from nearly two decades ago called "Secret Access." Back in the day, when it was still common practice for games to include cheat codes, we would slot them into the magazine section.

As a new editor, I had the unenviable task of tracking down options to fill those pages at a time when game developers were moving away from the practice; each month, the task grew a bit harder. To fill the gaps, I begged permission to veer away from codes to another "secret" corner of gaming: the then-nascent indie gaming scene.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

Each month, we'd select a promising title making its way to Xbox Live Arcade, PC, or some other early platform where small independent developers were making headway, and I'd write a single paragraph highlighting its potential. We hoped it was the right call to give these games a little space.

How times have changed.

Today, the indie gaming scene is a fully integrated and robust part of the marketplace. Most players I know seamlessly mix indies into their hobby, bouncing back and forth between games like Call of Duty or God of War and indie projects like Hades or Hollow Knight. Over the years, games like Minecraft, Five Nights at Freddy's, and Stardew Valley redefined expectations for the reach and popularity of indies.

At *Game Informer*, that single paragraph in each issue in the mid-2000s became a page, which later became a section, until the indie games we covered became a fundamental staple of our previews, reviews, and features. Today, the challenge isn't whether we cover indie games – it's how we find ways to surface the dozens of fascinating releases rolling out each month.

That's a dilemma with no end in sight. But this month, we wanted to acknowledge the success of the independent games movement. Despite some big success stories, many independent developers struggle to have their work played, and we hope to connect even a few curious players with something new. We selected one indie that we're especially excited about for an in-depth look; Sea of Stars comes to us courtesy of Sabotage Studio, the creators of the award-winning The Messenger. We also rounded up more than 30 other games spread across this issue that deserve attention.

Amid these many games, we hope you find something that captures your imagination – perhaps something you haven't yet discovered. From games crafted by hundreds of industry professionals to passion projects created by tiny teams, it's a great time to be into gaming.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
the INDIE issue
Sea of Stars

SEA OF STARS

Following the success of 2018's The Messenger, developer Sabotage decided to go all in on its dream project – a fully featured RPG inspired by greats like Chrono Trigger, Super Mario RPG, and more. We played the game's opening eight hours and spoke with the team about bringing its fantasy world to life and living up to the quality of the games that inspired it.

GAMEINFORMER

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Chris Pieretti

Editor-in-Chief
Matt Miller

Still has functioning Samba de Amigo Dreamcast controllers

Magazine Content Director
Kyle Hilliard

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Wesley LeBlanc
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Alex Van Aken

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Production Director
Margaret Andrews

Lead Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web/Graphic Designer
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Kristin Williams

Web Designer & Programmer
Jon Woodey

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Office Manager
Sarah Hansen

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

Contributors
Josh Broadwell
Louis Livingston-Garcia
Aidan Moher
Juno Ramona Stump
Sarah Thwaites
Connor Trinske

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Graphic Designer

I've cried. I've hurt. I've laughed. I've cringed. Indie games can tell the uncensored raw stories that capture the true range of the human experience. From stories of loss, immigration, acculturation, growing up, falling in love, heartbreak, queerness, and much more. You can step into the shoes of people whose experience is either unknown or like yours. They hold a special place in my heart because they help us develop empathy and feel deep connections. The world needs more of that.

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

Xbox Live Arcade was my starting point for indie games. Independent games existed before Live Arcade, but I have a vivid memory of checking out the demo for Braid and quickly recognizing I was playing a game made by a team who, like me, had been playing video games their whole life. Braid was trying to say something unique and interesting to players who had similarly grown up with the medium. It was a revelation, and I couldn't download the full game fast enough. The indie experience has only gotten more varied and interesting since then.

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Sea of Stars is inspired by the 16-bit greats like Chrono Trigger, but with all the bells and whistles contemporary design and modern technology allow. Read on for more from the developers, as well as impressions of the first eight hours.

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We spent time in Kabukichō, the real-life inspiration for the Yakuza series' Kamurochō, learning about real-life violence and crime with author and journalist Jake Adelstein.

26 SAY G'DAY

We talked to a host of developers in Australia about the rise of the country's indie scene, learning about the strengths, weaknesses, advantages, and disadvantages of working in a burgeoning creative community.

48 30 INDIES WE CAN'T WAIT TO PLAY

The *Game Informer* crew put their heads together to come up with 30 upcoming indie games we think you should keep your eyes on.

78 THE AGE OF NOSTALGIA

As more triple-A developers are remaking their old catalogs, a collection of independent creators are taking new games and making them old. We talked to the developers, YouTubers, and artists "demaking" your favorite games.

regulars

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ENOUGH TO SHARE

DOESN'T MEAN YOU

Have to

More kicks of flavor. More smiling snackers. More to *Love* Tyson

Tyson
100% ALL NATURAL
PERFECTLY CRISPY
CRISPY CHICKEN STRIPS
CHICKEN RAISED WITH NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER!
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Replies

RESIDENT EVIL 4

REWARDING REMAKES

Do you think remakes/remasters should get their own award catalog á la GOTY? Dead Space nailed its comeback with the recent remake and RE4 looks promising. I honestly feel that they deserve recognition even if their originals won awards in past years.
– via Instagram

↳ *Candidly, our end-of-the-year discussions and debates always end up surfacing this very topic. Some remakes rework the original so thoroughly that they feel like all-new games. Here at* Game Informer*, we have special categories for remakes and remasters, but for those special cases where remakes are so different from their originals (like Resident Evil 2 and Final Fantasy VII Remake), we consider them a new enough game to be in consideration for other awards. For us, it's a case-by-case basis, but 2023 already looks super competitive for the "Best Remake" category.*

MISHING AND MASHING

I just checked out the demo for Tape to Tape. It's a roguelite arcade hockey game and is really fun. I like how the industry is playing around more with formula mash-ups. Do you think we'll start seeing multiplayer or party game roguelites any time soon?
– chalkfullof via Discord

↳ *Triple-A creations often deliver unforgettable experiences that rival the production values and quality of the biggest Hollywood blockbusters. However, if you're looking for innovations, the indie space is the epicenter for interesting combinations of genres, mechanics, and visual styles. So many talented indie creators, like Tape to Tape developer Excellent Rectangle, are filling the various storefronts with enticing titles that take our favorite conventions novel directions. That same creativity could very well lead to a trailblazing developer experimenting in new spaces, like the roguelike multiplayer or party game you wished for. If you're hungry for more unique titles that expand upon our favorite mechanics and genres in exciting ways, head to our cover story (p. 38) to learn about indie RPG Sea of Stars, then read on to learn about some of the most promising and innovative indies on the horizon.*

A VIRTUAL SUCCESS?

Will VR ever become fully mainstream? Despite strong sales, VR gaming still seems to be pretty niche. What will it take for a VR headset to be considered a true competitor to traditional consoles?
– Jonah Abraham via Discord

↳ *Virtual reality was a hot-button topic this month, likely thanks to the release of PlayStation VR2. To this point, VR has faced down some daunting obstacles to carve out a dedicated community of enthusiasts, but it hasn't quite reached mainstream adoption the way traditional gaming consoles and PCs have. For some, strapping a headset on their head doesn't sound like a relaxing time, so there's not much that can be done for them. For the rest of the gaming community that's curious about VR, there is a path to greatly expanding the pool of players.*

Just like any nascent technology, the cost of entry is a massive barrier for most people. But, like Blu-ray players, flatscreen TVs, and most gaming consoles, the price goes down as the years go by. VR is uniquely positioned because most headsets require a high-end PC or gaming console, plus an expensive headset, controllers, and additional software to fully enjoy. For many, that just wasn't a realistic jump they were willing to take in the early days of the medium. However, headsets are becoming more affordable and require less intricate steps to get operational. It's impossible to overstate how important of a step that is in VR's path to potential mainstream acceptance. Now, VR developers just need to figure out how to effectively market their VR titles to people who aren't wearing a headset.

Reader art submission: Marsha Leigh

Reader art submission: Kaleigh Jones

Reader art submission: Sierra Javoroski, age 14

NOT PASSING THE SAVINGS ON TO US

Digital albums don't cost as much as physical albums. Digital movies don't cost as much as physical movies. Digital books don't cost as much as physical books. So why do digital games still cost the same as physical games? **– rowdyruff-rae via email**

↳ *In theory, you're right; physical games, with their increased manufacturing and production costs, should cost more. However, with such a thoroughly standardized price point of $60 in place during the rise of digital game sales, it seems most publishers decided to simply convert that price tag over to digital storefronts, hoping the convenience would make up for the lack of a physical disc. With digital sales making up the large percentage they do today, it seems those publishers were correct.*

Of course, now that many publishers have opted to raise the base price for triple-A releases to $70, it feels a bit worse to pay the same amount for digital games. Our best guess is that with the notion of physical and digital releases holding the same MSRP established early on, publishers carried that convention into this new era of game prices as well. However, digital storefronts seem to have more frequent and substantial discounts on games, showcasing the flexibility afforded by this method of purchasing. On top of that, just as subscription services like Spotify and Netflix have revolutionized the way we consume digital music and movies respectively, gaming has PlayStation Plus and Xbox Game Pass to soften the blow if you prefer downloading your games.

↘
Join the conversation

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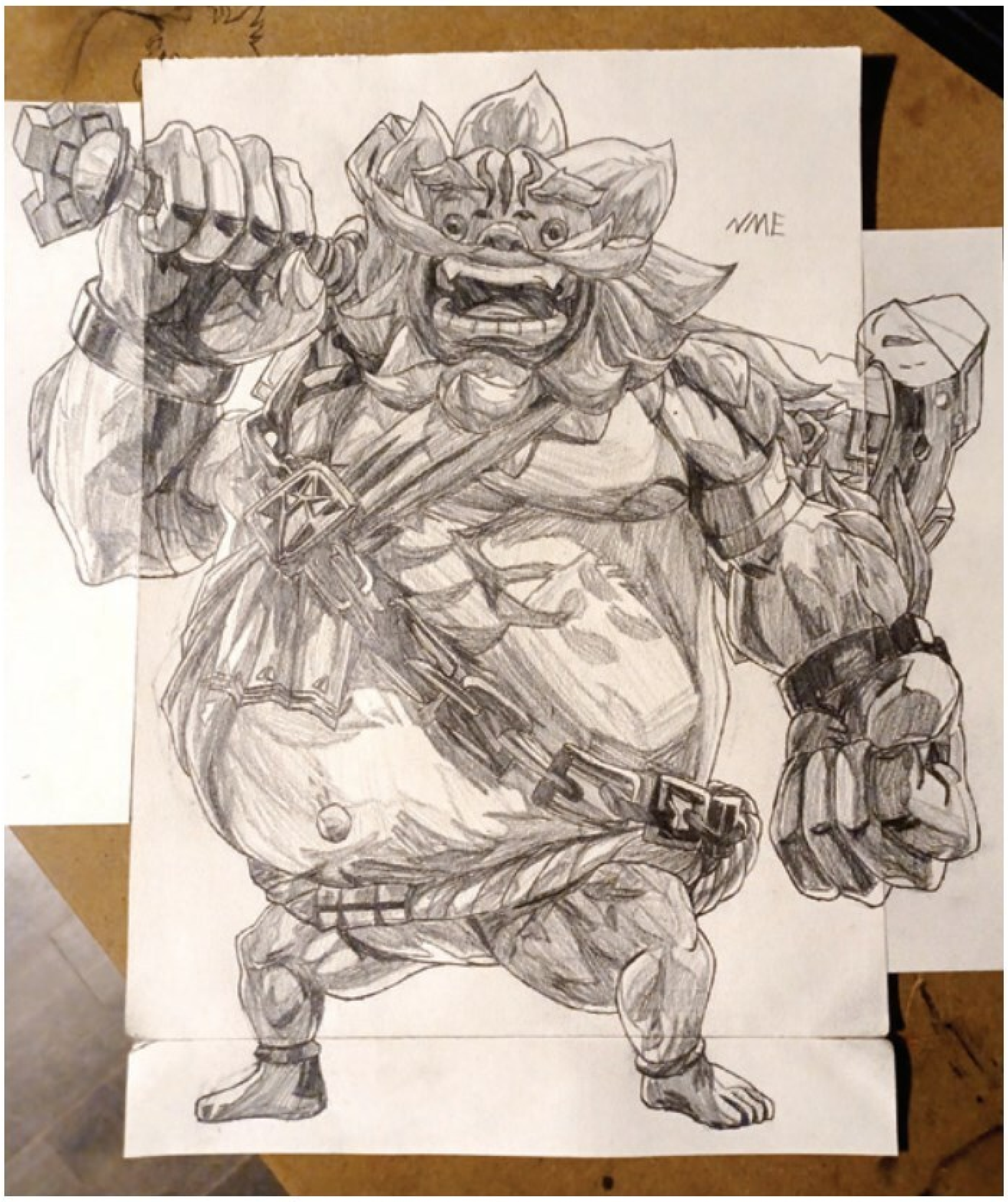
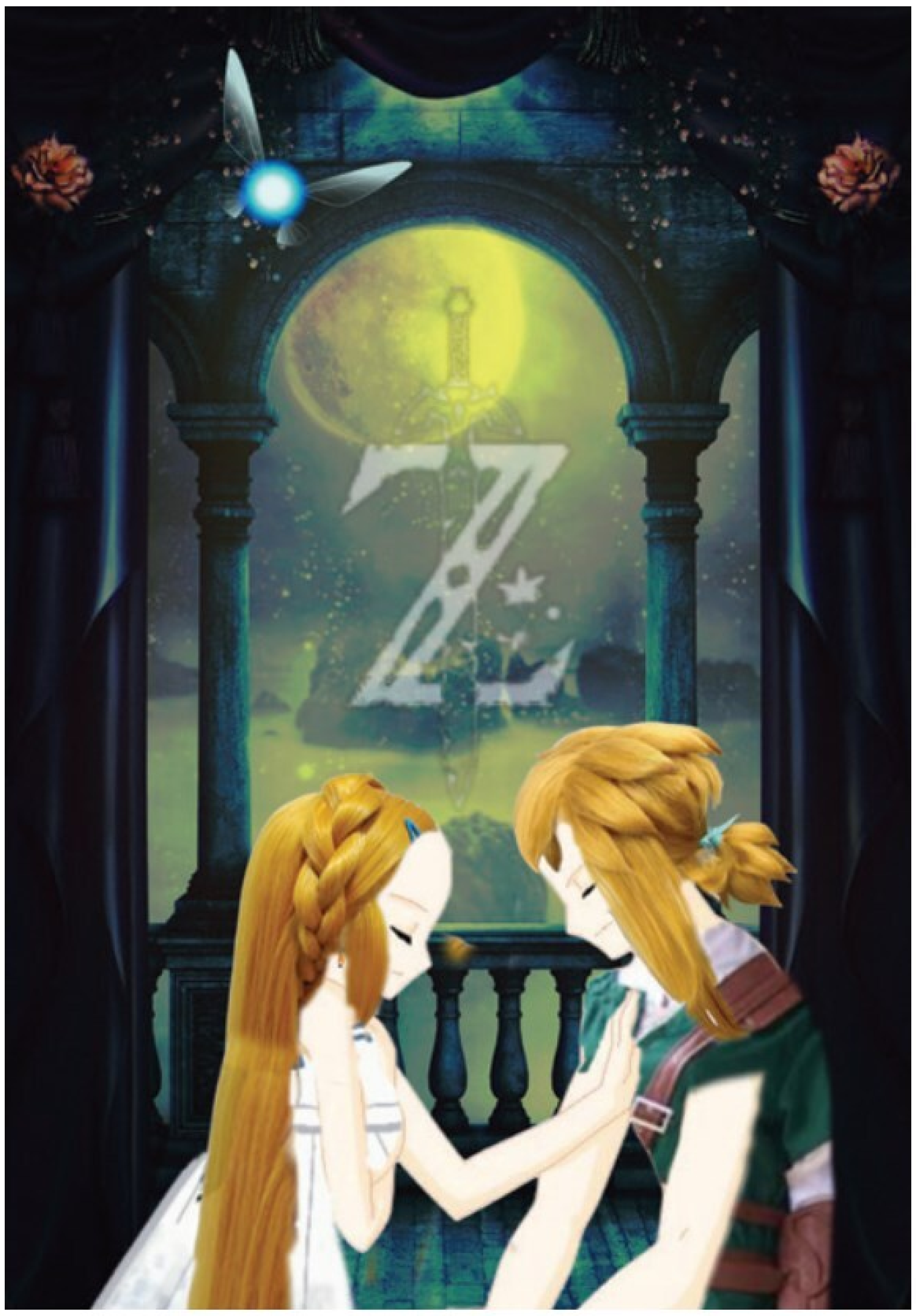


Reader art submission: Nathan Michael Evans, age 13



Reader art submission: Brittany Shinault

PLAYING FAVORITES

Has your favorite game of all time ever changed? And do you expect it to change at any point in the future? **– Bob Buel via Discord**

↳ *Once a favorite game is established, it can be difficult to dethrone it. Sometimes, it's nostalgia for the feeling it gave us. Other times, it's an unforgettable experience we had as fledgling gamers. Each person holds their favorite game in the high regard they do for different reasons. We asked some members of the* Game Informer *staff to chime in with their own answers to this question.*

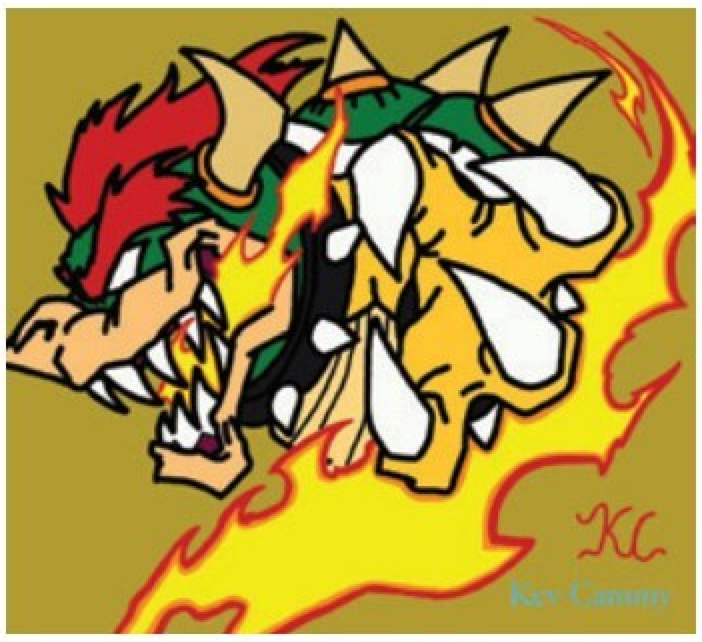
↳ *Kyle Hilliard: My first playthrough of Ocarina of Time is the reason you see my byline in this magazine. Nothing will ever top my personal experience with that game. It would be hard for anything to beat that.*

↳ *Brian Shea: When I played Ocarina of Time back in the late-'90s, it gave me a sense of wonder unlike anything I had ever felt before. With the rise of massive open-world games in the time since, I assumed I'd never feel that amazed by a game again. In 2017, Breath of the Wild proved me wrong and stole the throne.*

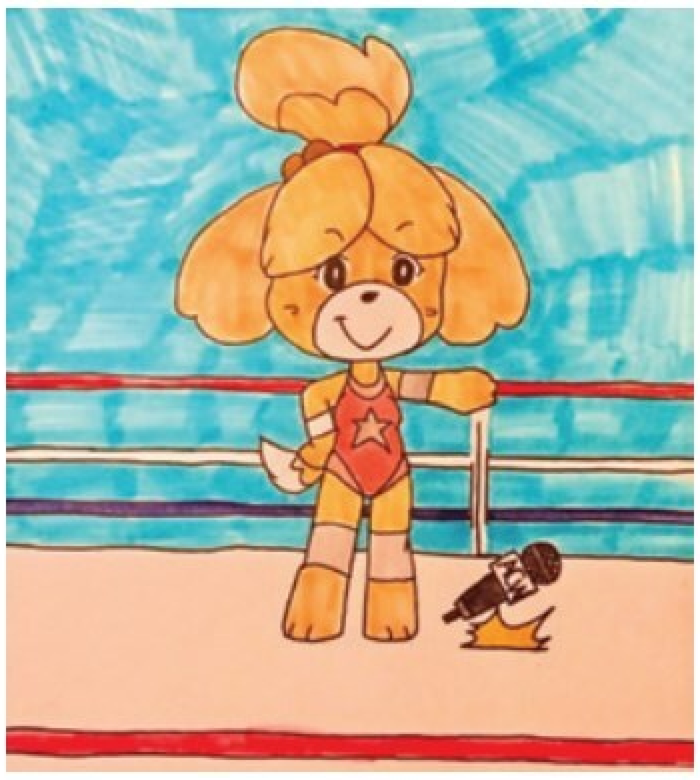
↳ *Blake Hester: No, they'll never top Tony Hawk's Underground.*

↳ *Marcus Stewart: I used to have one but now I tend to have a group rather than one set game. I'm agnostic like that.*

↳ *Mónica Rexach Ortiz: It used to be Kingdom Hearts, but now it's more of an ever-changing top 10 list. But Riku will always be my childhood crush.*



Reader art submission: Kev Cammy



Reader art submission: William Crowe

Soundoff: The Developers Readers Trust

We asked our readers and community which developers they most trust to deliver a great game every single time. Here are some of their responses!

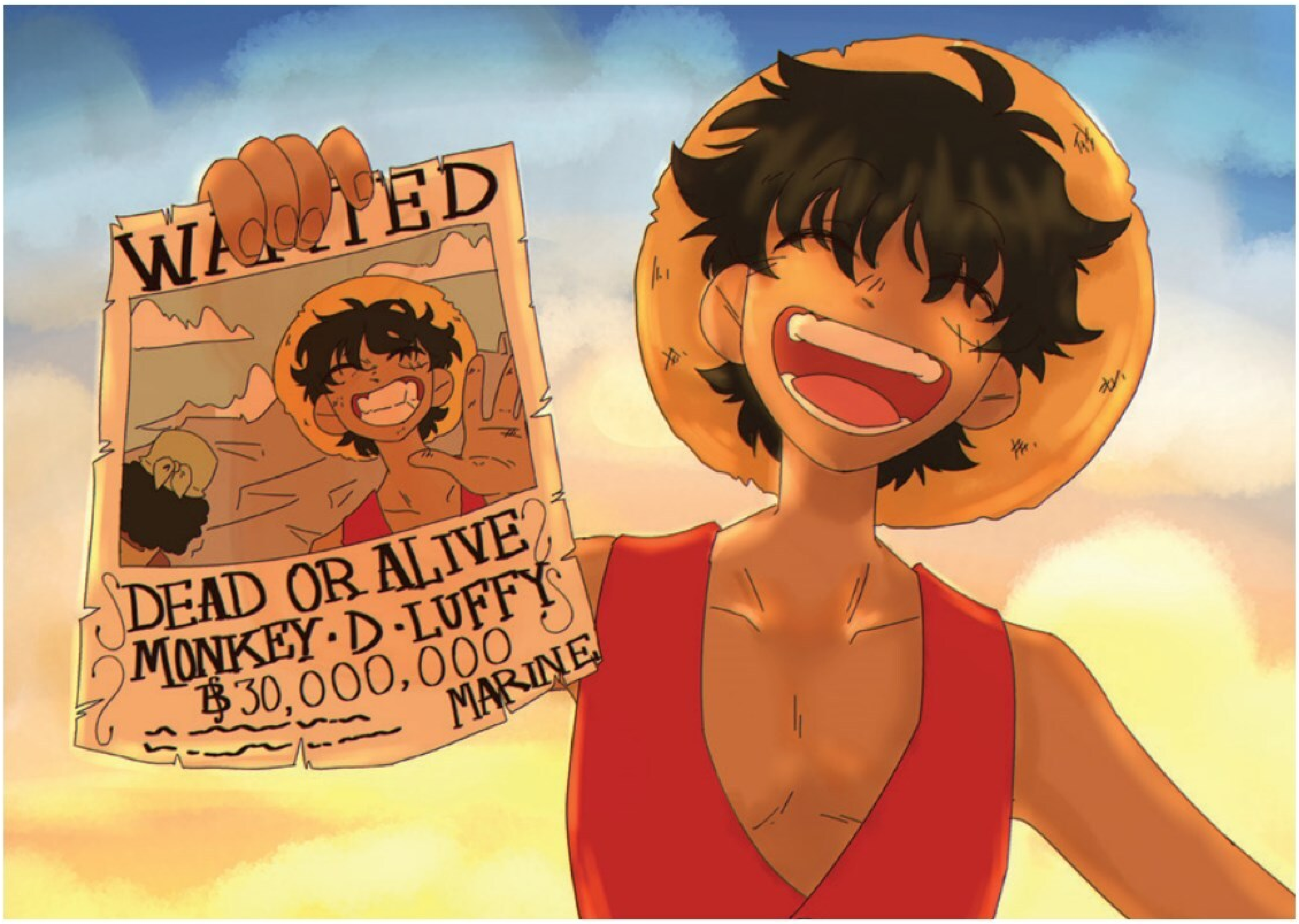
Supergiant because look at their games – 'nuff said! If I have to give a proper reason it's because every single one of its games is beautiful, unique, fun, and just about any other superlative you can think of. It has some of the best gameplay and world building, and the music, oh man, the music. I'm gonna stop typing now because I'll end up writing an entire magazine on its own, but definitely Supergiant!
– Matthew via email

The Zelda team at Nintendo. It has always innovated and used its ideas extremely well, polished its games, and, most importantly, made the games great. Other game devs often build upon ideas that the Zelda team originally came up with and sometimes they can't even match the quality at which it was first done.
– via Instagram

Naughty Dog, for sure. It has yet to disappoint me. Top-tier graphics, beautiful stories, and exciting, unique gameplay in every title. I feel I can always trust Naughty Dog to deliver sequels in its franchises that truly enrich the story and expand on already-incredible worlds. I will never not look forward to its releases!
– via Instagram

That would be Ryu Ga Gotoku for sure! One of the best at packing a game full of content and it makes sense for it to be there. It definitely gets my vote! **– via Twitter**

Team Ninja doesn't disappoint. Nioh and Nioh 2 have the best combat I've ever played in an action game, and Stranger of Paradise is also great. I know everything it puts out will be well done, and I'm very excited for its next huge project. **– via Twitter** ■



Reader art winner: Finn Smith

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

THE REAL-LIFE KAMUROCHŌ

A yakuza history lesson with *Tokyo Vice*'s Jake Adelstein **BY MARCUS STEWART**

IT'S AN UNCOMFORTABLY HUMID NIGHT in the bustling Shinjuku ward of Tokyo, Japan. I futilely try to circulate air in my sweat-stained shirt at an intersection surrounded by questionable bars and seedy nightclubs. A comparatively innocent landmark grabs my attention: a batting center. It's a delightfully familiar sight. But as I imagine its visitors enjoying a fun day swinging for the fences, author Jake Adelstein pops my thought bubble by telling me that the most horrific gang violence he ever witnessed unfolded on the corner we stand on: someone cracking another person's skull open with a baseball bat.

Kabukichō has a notorious, bloodstained history due to its long-standing role as host to yakuza and other gangs. It's also the inspiration for Kamurochō, the famous open world from the Yakuza series (now globally rebranded as Like A Dragon). Though the games don't shy away from that violent reputation, the semi-heroic portrayals of characters Kiryu and Ichiban Kasuga, along with the games' trademark silliness, make it easy to forget that the yakuza are objectively the bad guys, responsible for a number of horrific deeds. In the real world, that includes, among other things, murder, human trafficking, and various forms of extortion. A good number of those crimes occurred within Kabukichō's alleys. This city's bright lights can blind visitors to its dark past.

During a trip to Tokyo last September, we toured Kabukichō, experiencing its atmosphere and learning its history first-hand. We didn't trek the streets alone. To get a local perspective of the area's history and culture, especially its yakuza-heavy past, we enlisted the expert aid of Jake Adelstein, author of the 2009 memoir *Tokyo Vice*. Adelstein has lived in Japan since the early '90s as an investigative journalist covering organized crime. As the first foreign-born journalist at his newspaper, he spent years closely covering the activities of various yakuza gangs. His book documents these exploits, which have since been adapted into an HBO TV series. As we took in the sights, Adelstein regaled us with tales of Kabukichō's criminal history and evolution over the decades.

↓
Kamurochō as it
appears in Yakuza 6

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NANDE
DALOAN
NANDE
DALOAN

FROM SWAMP TO ADULT ENTERTAINMENT EPICENTER

Kabukichō is located in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward and sits on what was once a swamp called Tsunohazu. In the 1920s, urban development began, and Tsunohazu hosted many foreign-owned businesses. The most notable establishment was the "Tsurekomi Yado" or "Tsurekomi Inns," predecessors to the modern love hotels, private establishments providing discreet venues for sexual encounters charged hourly or nightly, that would later define Kabukichō. Heavy bombing during World War II devastated Tsunohazu, prompting its reconstruction as a theater district centered around a planned Kabuki theater with the new name of Kabuki-chō. Financial setbacks killed this plan, however, but the name stuck.

In the 1950s, Kabukichō morphed into an entertainment venue with recreational hot spots such as movie theaters, skating rinks, and traditional theaters. The district's first host club, nightclubs where waitstaff provides conversation and drinks to patrons under the guise of dates, Club Ai, opened in 1971. This ushered a wave of adult entertainment that flooded the area in the following decades. By the new millennium, Kabukichō was Asia's largest adult entertainment area. It now features thousands of bars, nightclubs, host clubs, love hotels, and massage parlors, earning its nickname the "Sleepless Town." As Jake tells us, "Traditionally, everything in this area was about getting sexual services. And maybe drinking cheaply."

24 hours open
b@gus

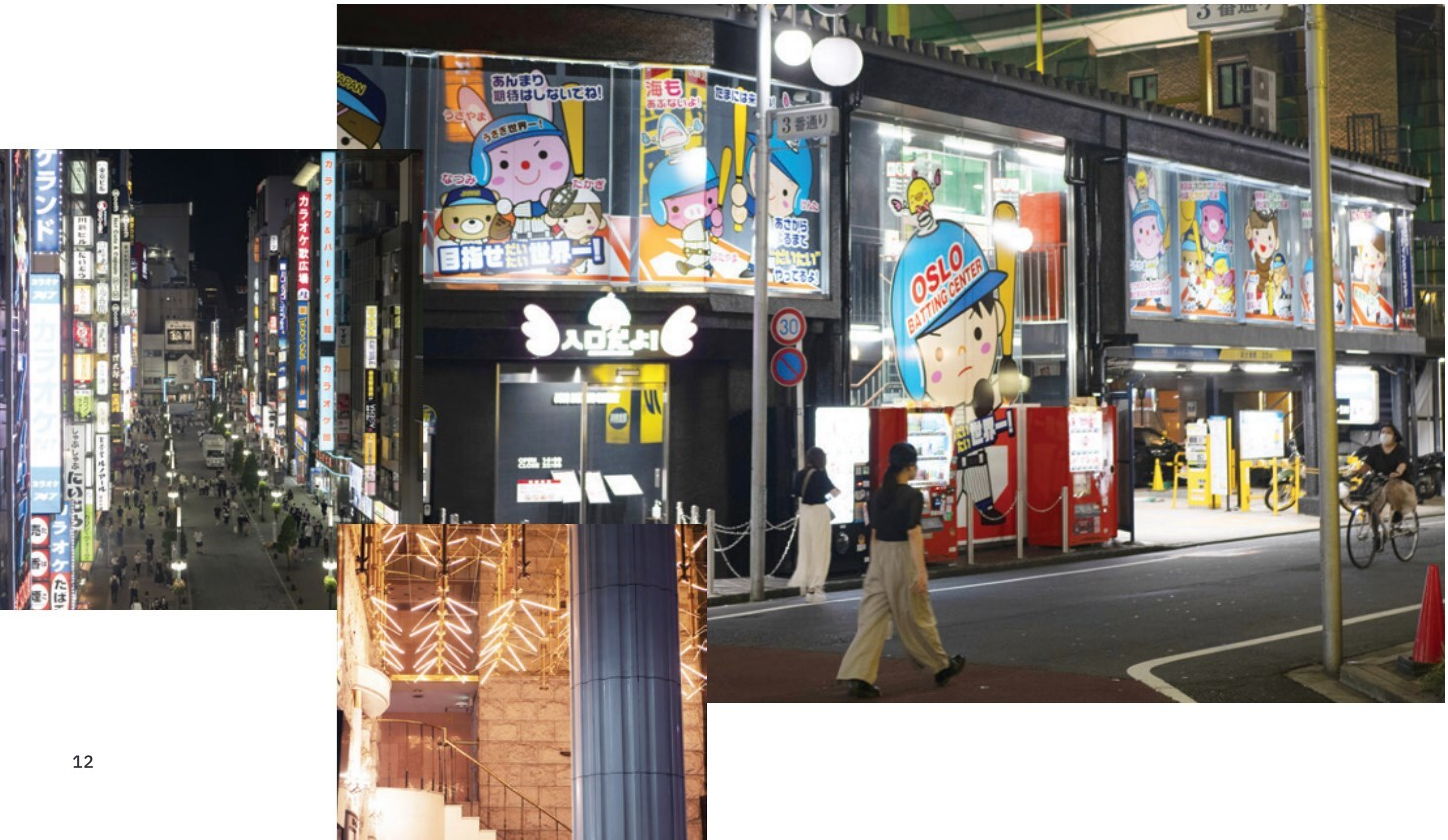
THE YAKUZA'S RISE AND DECLINE

Despite our destination, our journey begins rather innocently at a local Krispy Kreme. After meeting Jake and fueling up on donuts and coffee, we make the short trek down the bustling streets. Although several roads lead to the district, the flashiest and most recognizable entrance is Kabukichō ichiban machi (translated as Kabukichō 1st Avenue), the red neon arch immortalized in multiple Yakuza titles. Seeing it in person is a treat, and passing under it feels like entering a portal into the games themselves.

Kabukichō assaults the senses. Illuminated signs and billboards advertising the hottest hosts, unsettlingly attractive idols, various clubs, and more adult services plaster every wall space. Throughout our tour, young women donned in skimpy costumes, such as maids or schoolgirls, solicit us with flyers promoting their respective hostess clubs. On several occasions, bar employees attempt to coax us into their establishments with (often false) promises of cheap drinking prices. We spy one particular bar blatantly advertising additional, shall we say, adult pleasures, making Adelstein remark, "That is one of the most provocative bar signs I've ever seen. I'm surprised the police haven't busted this place."

Adelstein's comment alludes to the fact that the Kabukichō of today is a shell of its former self. As fans have seen in the games, there was a period when the district was regularly patrolled by yakuza enforcers, often in broad daylight, recognizable by their fancy suits, gaudy shirts, and immaculately coifed hair. Gang members collected protection money from businesses, often targeting foreign-owned establishments as they were targets of racial prejudice the police sometimes ignored. Of course, this also meant plenty of street violence as gangs regularly clashed over territory and other disputes. "Back in 1999, there was a lot of fighting gangs," says Adelstein. "[The police] were always getting calls in the middle of the night. There's always something happening."

During our walk, I imagine the countless brawls that likely unfolded within its sometimes cramped passageways, obscured from public view or on full display. The violence of the Yakuza games tends to



APA HOTEL
BAGUS

ami
SUNTORY
BRIAN BAR
串揚げ
2F
BRIAN BAR

be over-the-top, with players comically swinging large, unwieldy objects, from trashcans to bicycles, to smash attackers. Adelstein has only a cursory knowledge of the franchise (he enjoys them for the sightseeing aspect more than anything), but he claims to have witnessed several confrontations that would fit right at home in its universe. For example, he says he's seen a gang member use a bicycle as a weapon. We eventually reach the batting center, a staple destination in the games for players looking to unwind with a goofy activity between missions. Adelstein recalls stumbling upon a yakuza member in a confrontation with a rival on the very corner we stand. Jake is unclear about what they were arguing over, but the exchange escalated to the point where the yakuza grabbed a bat and used his target's head for batting practice. Adelstein vividly describes the sound of this impact as "like someone dropping a watermelon."

As scary as that sounds, touring Kabukichō today isn't quite as dicey as it perhaps was 15 years ago. Government clean-up efforts beginning in the early 2000s sought to reduce yakuza presence in the area and shut down morally questionable establishments, such as brothels and illegal clubs. An estimated 1,000 yakuza members occupied Kabukichō in 2004, but increased police patrols and the installment of surveillance cameras played a big part in pushing them into hiding. These cameras aren't hidden. I spot several of them during our walk through the district. Law enforcement wants you to know you're being watched, but it doesn't stop there.

"In 2005, they revised the organized crime control laws again so that technically just walking together as a group could be a violation [...] so you wouldn't see [yakuza] out in the wild," Adelstine says.

We don't go too far into the night without noticing a cop car or officers patrolling. We actively avoid them because even though we were doing nothing suspicious, as Jake quips, "Maybe they'll harass us just because they're bored."

THEATRE
alpha
TSUKASA
GROUP
KAK
もんじゃ
POLICE

Despite this pressure, the yakuza aren't entirely gone from Kabukichō. Adelstein assures us some still linger; they're just less obvious and nowhere near as numerous. In addition to taking us by an unassuming office building that remains an active yakuza headquarters, Jake invites us to have coffee at Parisienne. This cafe and the surrounding block were once well-known epicenters for yakuza chairmen meetings during what Jake calls "the old days." Adelstein spent many days here eavesdropping on gang leaders or socializing with others who served as inside sources for his investigations. A kind elderly gentleman serves us, who Jake points out has been working at the cafe for decades, meaning his friendly eyes have witnessed all kinds of crooked dealings unfold in our very seats.

We lower the volume of our conversation; Jake informs us that casually uttering "yakuza" makes people nervous or suspicious, so we refer to them as "businessmen" during our visit. He also teaches us a bit of sign language, running his finger down his face to indicate a scar. Facial scars are telltale signs of a yakuza, as it's proof they survived a deadly fight (eventually, many members scarred themselves to appear tougher than they perhaps were), so performing this silent gesture lets people know what you're talking about.

As we dine, Adelstein explains how the Japanese government's decades-long crackdown on Kabukichō went hand in hand with the yakuza's steady decline. In addition to the new laws, he believes many of their struggles have been self-inflicted due to greed. As he puts it, society tolerated the yakuza for so long because they once served a purpose. Many people hired their enforcers to settle civil disputes that traditional courts either dismissed, took ages to settle, or were too weak to enforce a ruling. Yakuza served as the people's champions in some ways by more effectively solving citizens' problems. While they were never above crimes such as extortion, blackmail, and bid rigging, they didn't cross certain lines. That was until some factions became over-ambitious and aggressive, pulling taboo stunts like evicting people from their homes. Provocative acts like this earned more and more ire from the public and police until they eventually couldn't be ignored; the hostile actions of a few groups spoiled it for the bunch. The persistent infighting between families means widespread cooperation on big jobs that could benefit all of them has become much harder to pull off.

Besides that, Adelstein claims that yakuza haven't adapted to modern times. Japan's increased surveillance society and modern crime-fighting techniques have crippled their ability to operate as effectively as they once had, and a decline in recruitment of younger members has left factions with an aging guard with outdated ideas of how to maintain influence and relevance.

"The average age of your member is 50 years old," says Adelstein. "I'm 53, right? So that would make me like, you know, a senior. You can't survive as a bunch of gangsters when your average age is 50, man. It's not getting younger. Anybody who's smart sees that there's no future for these guys."

KABUKICHŌ TODAY

After finishing our coffees and pastries, we hit the streets once again. It's late in the evening, and Kabukichō has quieted, with only a handful of passersby making their way home or perhaps searching for an open hole in the wall for one last round. I get a last chance to soak in the area's current state.

While criminal activity and illicit entertainment defined the Kabukichō of old, the area now primarily promotes selling affection. I probably saw more host clubs than any other business. While some can be relatively innocent (and I'm being generous), Jake warns that the sleaze remains and that visitors, especially women, and tourists, should be wary.

"Some are basically very fraudulent," Adelstein explains. "Like, they would lure in girls at low prices, and then they keep jacking up the price. And sometimes they jack the price so high [...] it's like, 'Well, if you can't pay the bills that you owe,' then they introduce the girl to a loan shark, which is connected to the host club, and then the host and the loan shark introduce them to a sex shop where they start working to pay off their debt. So, it's kind of this sinister operation where they basically create indentured servants from their customers."

We also spot a few pawn stores nearby, which have a symbiotic relationship with host clubs as patrons visit them to buy cheap gifts for their favorite hosts, who often turn around and pawn them right back. While a segment of Japanese youth once aspired to become yakuza, Jake says this has shifted to where perhaps just as many would rather become hosts and hostesses themselves. But the competition is fierce, and it may not even be worth it right now since the business, as a whole, has suffered due to the pandemic and the current weak economy, since patrons, mainly men, have less disposable income to throw at these establishments.

Despite this, Kabukichō has other offerings that don't involve paying people to pretend they're attracted to you. Some love hotels have converted into traditional themed inns; we saw some promoting Hawaiian and Indonesian experiences. For those who enjoy drinking, Golden Gai's tight alleyways, packed with numerous small, intimate bars, can be good for enjoying spirits in a quieter, authentic atmosphere (though some forbid foreigners). I was also surprised when we stumbled upon Hanazono Shrine, a famed 17th-century Shinto Shrine sticking out like a sore thumb amongst modern architecture. Toho Cinema, recognizable by the giant Godzilla statue head looming over it, lets you take in a flick and keep off the streets. Of course, every fan of the Yakuza games must hit the multi-story, 24-hour Don Quixote store.

2F
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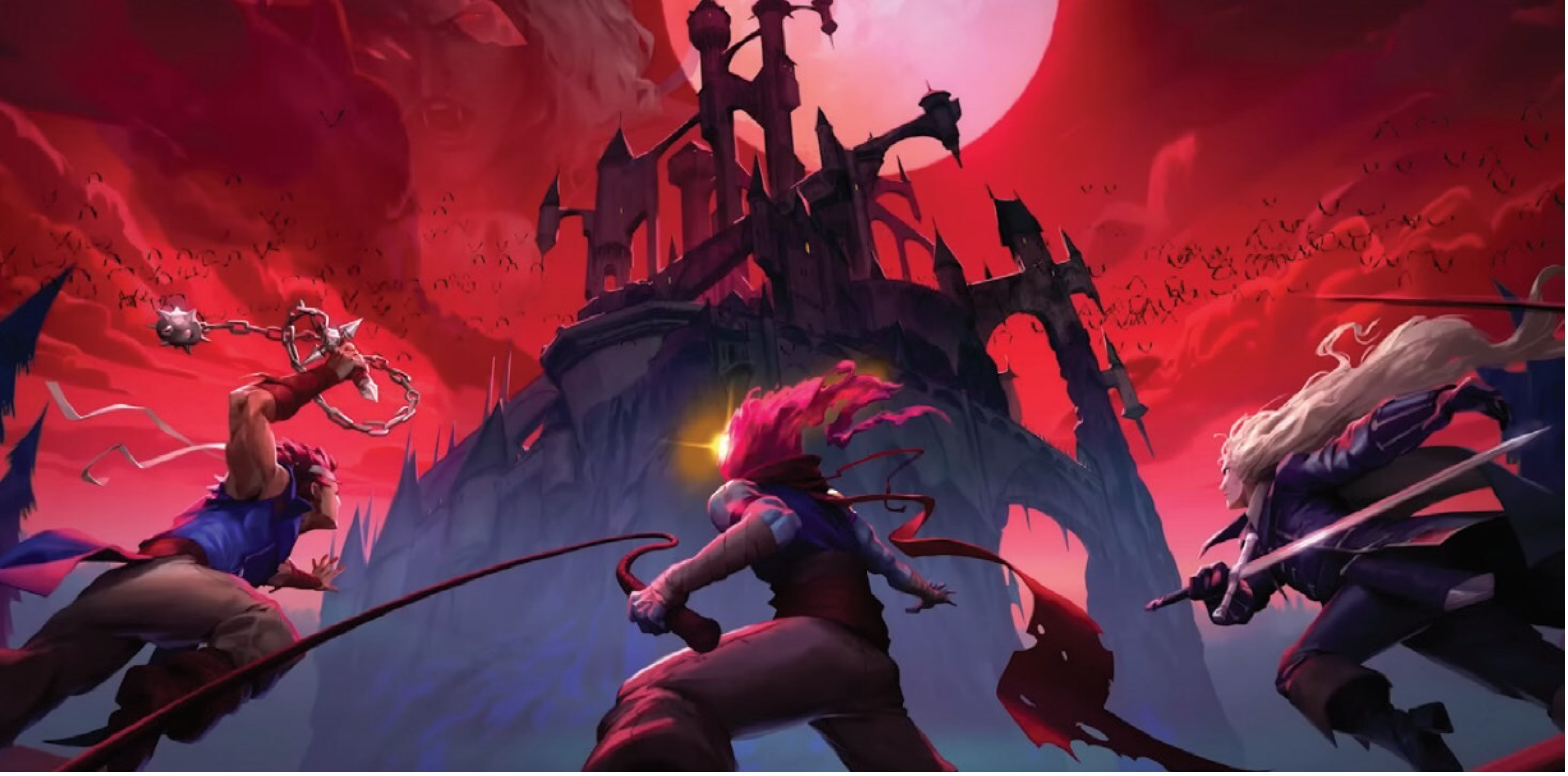
SPECIALE
勇肉
オロチョンラーメン
SWITCH
PHOTOSTUDIO

The ongoing addition of these more innocent attractions and continued crackdown on gangster activity have helped slowly repair Kabukichō's reputation. But its seedier elements shouldn't be ignored. Despite clean-up efforts, Kabukichō ranked third on the Tokyo Police Department's 2019 list of the city's most dangerous districts based on crime data and had the highest number of violent crimes that year. Strolling the streets as a starry-eyed video game-loving tourist, I was easily swept up in the novelty of stepping into a real version of a world I recognized and enjoyed. A visit isn't out of the question – Tokyo as a whole is one of the world's safest cities – as long as you remember where you are and recognize the hidden scars of this former den of debauchery. ■



The Keys to Dracula's Castle

How the Dead Cells team scored a Castlevania crossover **BY CHARLES HARTE**

Castlevania is one of the most influential franchises of all time, and that influence is immediately visible when you look at indie games from the last 10 years. Dead Cells is one of the best examples, combining 2D action, exploration, and a gothic art style with a randomized, roguelike level structure. When a collaboration between Dead Cells and Castlevania was announced, it was more than just a perfect match; it was a dream come true. We spoke with Evil Empire, the developer behind the upcoming DLC, about how this perfect pairing originated.

"It started in a way that we didn't really expect," says Evil Empire co-founder Benjamin Laulan. The story began at BitSummit, an indie game festival in Kyoto, Japan. He says the team was looking for a Japanese publisher to help it create a retail version of Dead Cells for Japan, and that Konami, developer/publisher of Castlevania, was one of them.

"I had this crazy idea that if we worked with Konami, maybe they would let us make an Alucard skin or a weapon that we could include in the game as a bonus for Japanese players," Laulan says. When Konami was receptive to the idea, he figured he could try asking for even more, and worked with artists to mock up a pitch for a Castlevania-themed expansion. To Laulan's delight, Konami was on board right away.

"They said yes, straight away, without even looking at the presentation. They said, 'Yeah, we've been waiting for you guys to ask us.' They were actually Dead Cells fans," he says.

Even though Konami was on board, the team figured it would be working under a lot of restrictions, since the Castlevania franchise is such a big deal. "It was pretty much the opposite," Laulan says. "[We got] pretty much everything we asked for."

Brand manager Bérenger Dupré, who was part of the initial brainstorming process, says, "it was definitely like playing with a toy chest. I was like, 'Can I say that I want the carriage from Rondo of Blood in the game?' And they say, 'Oh yeah, it's cool.' Stuff like that [happened] all the time. We just had fun with every part of what we love in the franchise."

Nostalgia was a driving force behind the DLC's development. When I ask about their relationships to the series, Dupré recalls Christmas morning as an 8-year-old, when he received the original Castlevania as his second NES game ever. Other members of the development team had similar levels of nostalgia, one of whom Dupré called "a human Wikipedia of the franchise." At the same time, members of the team that had never played a game in the series were able to connect with the franchise regardless, either by playing fan-favorite Symphony of the Night or by watching the animated Netflix show.

Dupré says this mixture of experience levels was something Evil Empire took advantage of when planning its announcement trailer at The Game Awards. As the teaser goes along, it offers more and more hints at what the game actually is, until the big reveal at the end. The team watched videos on YouTube the next day and saw reactions varied by how old the viewers were.

Dupré says, "[When] you see younger YouTubers watch the trailer, you can see this little spark that, 'Oh my god, I'm missing something, but it looks really cool and I want to be part of it.' That was part of the intention. We had to speak to newcomers and old players."

Whether or not they knew the franchise it's based on, Dead Cells fans are receiving a massive wave of new content. In fact, Laulan says Return to Castlevania is twice as big as any expansion the team has ever created. Its added 14 new weapons, 20 outfits, three bosses, two biomes, 12 reimagined Castlevania tracks, 51 classic Castlevania tracks, and an entirely new storyline. Since this is so much more work than usual, I asked the developers if there were any unexpected development hurdles. Their answer was something a lot of players take for granted: stairs.

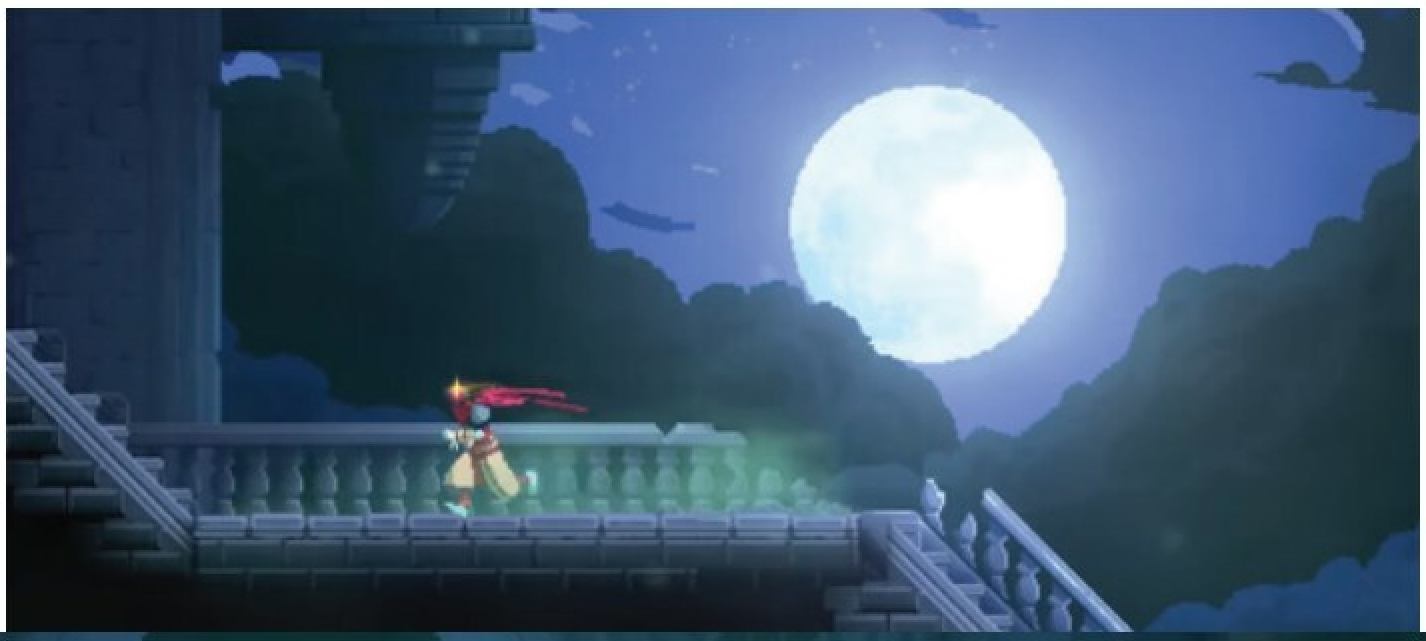
"We have platforms, but there are no stairs [in Dead Cells]," Laulan says. "But Castlevania is super famous for moments where you climb stairs. When you face off with Dracula, if you don't climb the whole staircase before the whole showdown – that would be super unsatisfying."

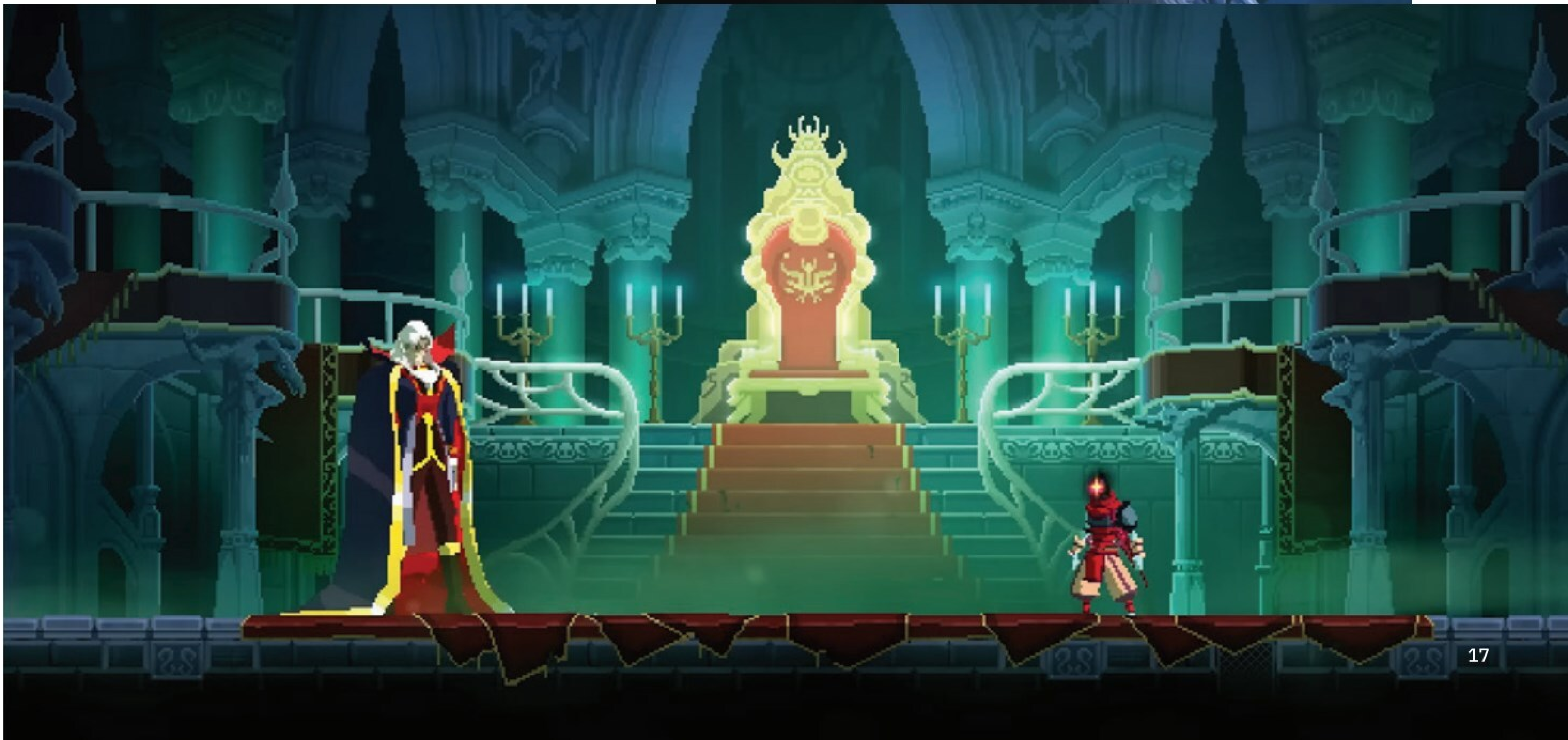
While it might not seem like that big of a deal, adding stairs complicated a lot of elements in the game, like enemy AI patterns. Though it was difficult, the team developed "a whole new system" to add stairs and diagonal platforms into the game. "It was maybe the hardest thing to do," Laulan says.

Once Evil Empire had a playable build ready – stairs and all – some of the team from Konami came to check it out. "The first time we gave them the controller, it was so cool," Laulan says. "We had this historic Castlevania project producer that played the DLC. He was just super excited, seeing the old characters and weapons he used to know in this modern roguelike setup. It was super cool."

It's heartwarming to watch Laulan and Dupré talk about this project. After years of working on a game inspired by this series, it clearly means a lot that their team is the one that gets to bring fans back to Castlevania. It's a full-circle moment in their careers that many developers can only dream of, and Evil Empire is not letting the opportunity go to waste.

"We really wanted to create this as an homage and a love letter to the IP, rather than try to rethink the whole thing," Laulan says. "That's why there are so [many] Easter eggs and details. We put so much effort into all the small things. The small things make a difference." ■





HARDWARE REVIEW

PLAYSTATION VR2

An upgrade as opposed to a revelation

BY KYLE HILLIARD

The original PlayStation VR, from the outside at least, seemed like a moderate success for Sony. It was a functional VR alternative for players who were not interested in entering the world of PC gaming, and it had at least one undeniable, exclusive hit with Astro Bot Rescue Mission (which is unfortunately not playable on the new headset).

PlayStation VR2 is the next logical step for the sub-platform. It works with Sony's latest hardware and improves upon basically every aspect of PlayStation VR, but it's not quite the virtual reality revolution we've been waiting for since the advent of the medium.

The Setup

Every virtual reality setup requires some sort of headache-inducing process to get up and running, and few were more notorious than the original PlayStation VR. It may have lacked the multiple cameras on tripods of early VR headsets, but the number of cables and HDMI pass-throughs was absurd. PlayStation VR2 graciously breaks this all down into one, long USB-C cable. The headset simply plugs into the front of the PlayStation 5, and you're good to go. The cable length is generous, but it is locked to the headset. I did not have a chance to test out extension cables but know that the length of the cable in the box, about 15 feet, is basically what you will be working with.

Once you're plugged in, the process is straightforward. You adjust the headset on your face, go through a handful of steps, and are basically up and running.

The Eye Tracking

Part of the initial setup process is ensuring the eye tracking is up and running. In the context of the setup process, I was impressed with how well it works. Looking at a series of dots was quick and functional. It's a strange experience for a piece of technology to acknowledge where you're looking, and I am excited to see how it's implemented in future games. It seems only to be used for menu navigation, so far, but I am hopeful future games take full advantage of the technology and do something interesting with it.

The Passthrough Camera

A requirement for all VR headsets moving forward is the passthrough camera. PlayStation VR2 is not the first to use it, but it is among the highest quality, thanks to the camera's resolutions and the headset screen. There is a dedicated button to activate the passthrough camera at any time on the headset, and I took advantage of it often. Getting a glimpse of where you are at any moment is invaluable, and using it to pause and chat with someone nearby is incredibly helpful. I really appreciate that it has a dedicated button, and I hope competing future headsets take note of how useful it is.

The Headset

The actual headset is impressive. The way it rests on your head is comfortable and soft. It feels appropriately tight where you can move your head freely, but not so tight that it is headache-inducing. As a dedicated glasses wearer, I am prepared to call PlayStation VR2 the most glasses-friendly headset I have ever worn – a title it is appropriately stealing from the original PlayStation VR. This comes down to the fact that rather than the headset being pressed against the user's face, it actually rests right in front of the user's eyes. The strap around your head, which fits like a baseball cap, is doing the heavy lifting of keeping everything in place. It's a smart, more comfortable move. The soft rubber that shrouds your vision in darkness also feels nice and does a better job than the original headset of keeping light out. Letting in too much light can lead to nausea.

The Sense Controllers

The PlayStation VR2 Sense controllers are a massive upgrade from the Move controllers used with the original headset. They're comfortable, responsive, and don't rely on light for tracking. Motion controls have a bad rap in the world of video games, but playing with the Sense controllers, and comparable modern VR controllers, is a reminder that the technology is actually quite good. One annoyance – and this is more a complaint for all Sony hardware – is syncing the controllers requires plugging them into the system with a USB-C cable. The controllers come with a cable, so you don't have to tear apart your house to track one down, but I look forward to a future where adding a controller to your PlayStation system does not require an additional piece of hardware.

The Games

PlayStation VR2 has little in the way of exclusives beyond Horizon Call of the Mountain (see our review on page 77 or on GameInformer.com), but the good news is there is a large collection of previously released games already available on the platform. Runner is a motorcycle riding and shooting arcade game that takes nearly all its visual cues from *Akira*. Thumper is an excellent, and sometimes horrifying rhythm game that's great in VR. Tetris Effect is fantastic on every platform, but is particularly thrilling in VR, as is Rez, which comes from the same team. After The Fall is a horde zombie shooter featuring excellent gunplay and fun co-op. Additionally, games like No Man's Sky, Gran Turismo 7, and Resident Evil Village also have VR modes or are playable entirely in VR. This is not a comprehensive list, but just a few standouts from the games we sampled. Unfortunately, there are no announced plans to bring Half-Life Alyx or Resident Evil 4 to PlayStation VR2, but Beat Saber – arguably VR's killer app – is on the way at some point in the future.

The Visuals

The headset and controllers are all incredibly comfortable – maybe even the most comfortable in the world of VR headsets – but the visuals are where PlayStation VR2 begins to underwhelm. While the in-headset visuals are an undeniable improvement over PlayStation VR and VR headsets of the past, it is still lacking. There is still a general blurriness (an issue that affects all VR headsets) that I recognize is difficult to overcome, considering how close your face is to the screen at all times, but it doesn't change the fact that playing VR for some time and switching to a standard PlayStation 5 game showcases a large gap in visual fidelity. It looks better, especially when comparing the same game in PlayStation VR and PlayStation VR2, but it is not a visual revelation – just an improvement. ■

GRADE: C

PlayStation VR2 is a big upgrade over PlayStation VR. The headset is more comfortable, the controllers work and feel better, the eye tracking is interesting and functional, the pass-through camera makes the whole experience friendlier, and the in-headset screen looks much better. But none of those upgrades fully overcome the problems that all VR headsets continue to struggle with. The visuals still look a little muddy, nausea continues to be an issue, and most of the games available, with a few exceptions, are available on other VR platforms. PlayStation VR2 is a good piece of well-made hardware, but it is not the revelation I was hoping to have for the virtual reality medium.

$549 | *playstation.com*

↓
Find all of our PlayStation VR2 content online at GameInformer.com/PSVR2

GEAR

COOL GEAR FOR SPRING

In our never-ending quest to track down the best tech, toys, tabletop games, and gear, 2023 has already become a standout. Whether you're shopping for yourself or looking for a gift for that special someone, we've got plenty of options. **BY MATT MILLER, BRIAN SHEA, AND ALEX VAN AKEN**

1
Game
BRB
Starting soon
368

❶ LOUPEDECK LIVE S

The Loupedeck Live S is a workstation control interface allowing users to create custom pages with contextual actions, streaming shortcuts, scene-switching, and desktop macros for a variety of programs like the Adobe Creative Suite, Ableton Live, OBS Studio, Spotify, and Streamlabs. While Loupedeck's software needs more optimization, the Live S is a handy tool for content creators seeking to implement a touch-sensitive controller into their workflow.

$190 | *loupedeck.com*

2
EXPLORER
NERF
+ BOBA FETT
+ JABBA'S SAIL BARGE
+ DARTH VADER
IMPERIAL SHUTTLE
STORMTROOPER
+ LUKE SKYWALKER
HEADHUNTER
3
STAR WARS
THE DECKBUILDING GAME
4

❷ NERF ELITE JR. EXPLORER

Nerf blasters continue evolving designs in ever more extravagant directions, many of which aren't suitable for younger enthusiasts. The Elite Jr. line focuses on simple and safe designs easy for kids to enjoy, with lighter weights, grips for smaller hands, and easy loading. The Explorer can blast out four darts before making you scramble around to find them, and includes eight darts in the pack – you know you're losing at least a couple.

$13 | *shop.hasbro.com*

❸ STAR WARS: THE DECKBUILDING GAME

This cleverly constructed card game for two players has each side take control of the Empire or Rebels and work to take down their opponent's bases. Players each draw cards from a shared row of revealed options to flesh out a private deck. Some cards are neutral and available to each player, but others are unique to a particular faction and can be sabotaged or bounty hunted to remove their availability. Easy to learn but deep in its strategic potential, it's a worthy entry in a recent strong run of Star Wars tabletop games.

$38 | *fantasyflightgames.com*

❹ IMMORTAL HULK GALLERY DIORAMA

The Immortal Hulk comic series took the rage of the title character in exciting directions, focusing on horror and trauma to present new facets in the long-running character arc. This beautifully sculpted diorama statue perfectly captures the uncontrollable beast at his most ferocious, and with its nearly foot-tall height, it has the presence to dominate a display.

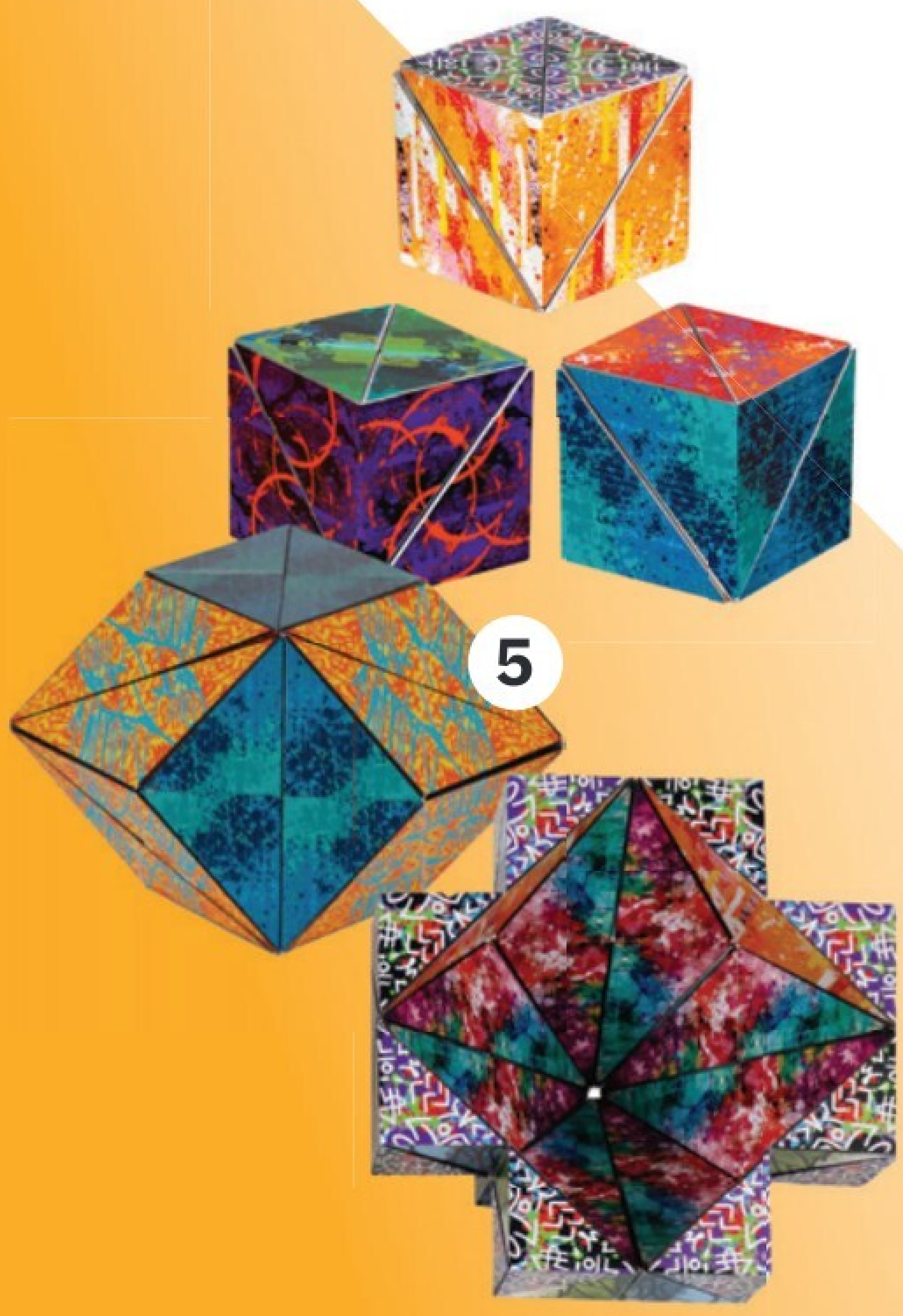
$125 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

The Loupedeck Live S solves multiple problems for content creators in the handy form-factor of a single touch-sensitive controller

3
GENESIS
SEGA

4
COYOTE & CROW
CORE RULEBOOK



❶ MONACO 5.1.2 SURROUND SPEAKERS

The Monaco all-in-one sound system offers a superb solution for a standout surround audio setup in your theater space, but with low complexity that won't scare off relative newcomers to audio tech. The wireless speakers (except power cords) use WiSA SoundSend to transmit perfectly synchronized audio from your TV. The Dolby Atmos-enabled sound is lifelike, cinematic in scope, and rich in distinct sounds from onscreen action; it's a particularly ideal match to a gaming setup.

$1,500 | *shop.platinaudio.us*

❷ BENQ X3000i GAMING PROJECTOR

Projectors have become an excellent way to display your favorite games, as illustrated by products like the X3000i. The 4K output and intense brightness rated at 3000 ANSI lumens help give great picture quality, and you'll find the HDR performance impressive. Dedicated gaming modes for FPS, RPGs, and sports gaming help to differentiate your experience, but in every case, extremely low lag makes for a big win.

$2,000 | *benq.com*

❸ SEGA GENESIS MINI 2

The mini console trend may have slowed down, but Sega recently released a follow-up to its 2019 Sega Genesis Mini. This new version delivers a new form factor based on the Genesis Model 2, a six-button gamepad, and a whole new catalog of classic and obscure games that stretch into the Sega CD library.

$100 | *sega.jp*

❹ COYOTE & CROW CORE RULEBOOK

Drawing inspiration from the indigenous cultures of its creative team, this new tabletop role-playing game posits an alternate history in which the last 700 years of colonization never happened; a strange mystical power allowed a vastly different civilization to develop. A game of building legends and exploring alternate ways of resolving conflicts, it's a fascinating twist on expectations for gaming groups looking to try something new – no matter your cultural background.

$70 | *shop.coyoteandcrow.net*

❺ CUBENDI

The Shashibo magnetic puzzle box has only gained in popularity since its release, so it's no surprise that Fun In Motion Toys has a new follow-up rolling out. Like its cousin, the Cubendi is a folding puzzle box that uses internal magnets for various fascinating configurations. Part fidget toy and part puzzle, the arrangements and options are more complex and challenging this time – perfect for busy fingers and minds.

$25 | *funinmotiontoys.com*

❻ RICOH THETA SC2

Don’t be put off by the SC2’s status as an “entry-level” 360-degree camera. The 14MP 360 photos and 4K video that the camera produces turn out nicely for a device at this price point, letting users experiment with image capture in all directions simultaneously. Its compact size and ease of use offer a great way to get into this burgeoning arena of photography and videography.

$300 | *theta360.com*

❼ DUALSENSE EDGE CONTROLLER

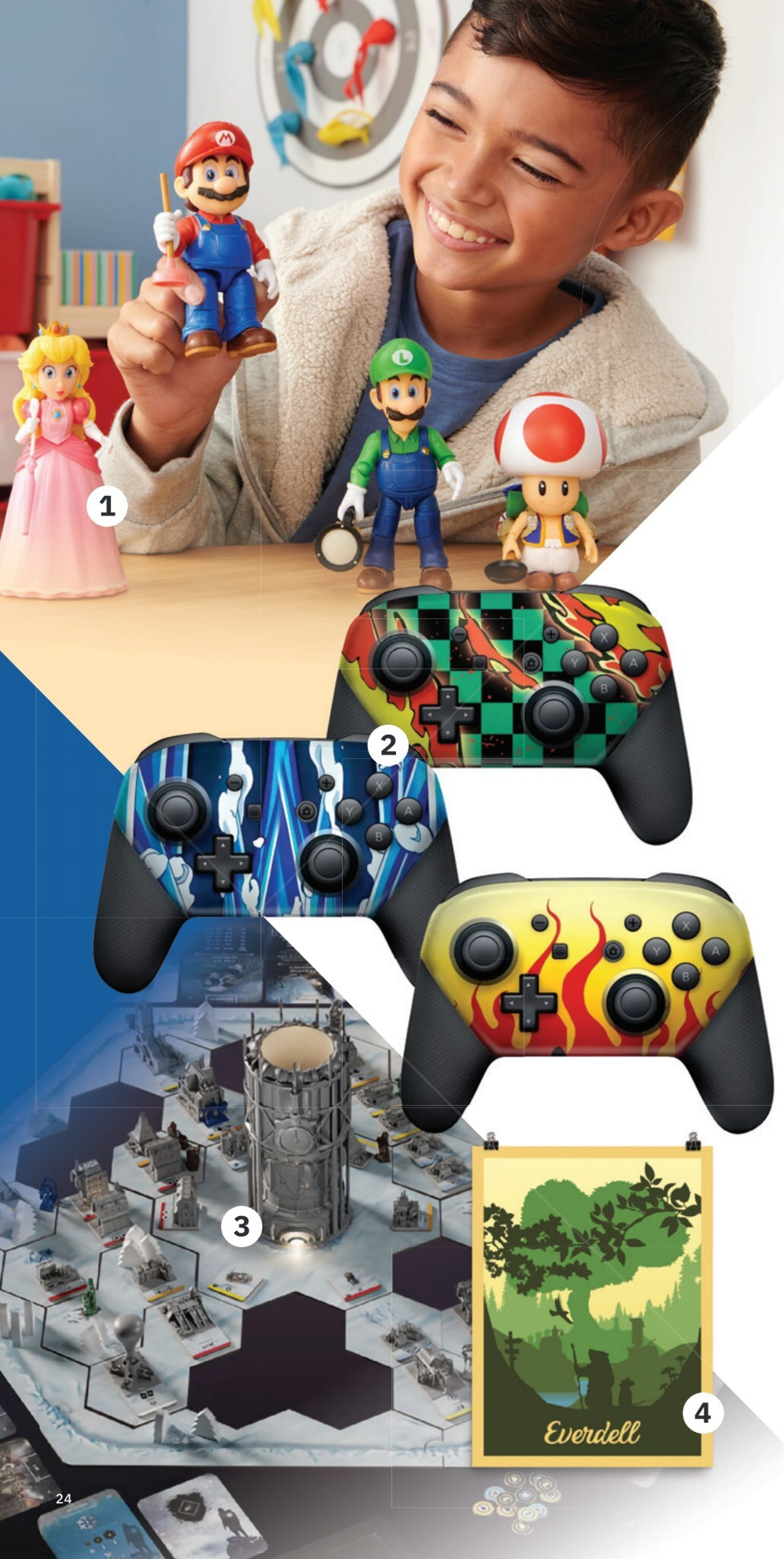
The DualSense that shipped with the PS5 is already a stellar controller. But this pricey upgrade might be worth it for players looking for greater personalization and increased input options while holding on to all the awesome features of the original. Tweakable profiles and mappable button layouts, multiple stick caps, and two half-dome or lever back buttons – everything is presented to support flexibility and a premium feel. All the new features ding the battery life a bit compared to the original DualSense, but that’s the worst part about an upgrade to what many have described as the best first-party controller on the market.

$200 | *playstation.com*

❽ LEGO LION’S KNIGHT CASTLE

Longtime builders will appreciate this sprawling fortress’ many nods to the castle sets of yore and the possibility of instilling a love of the theme in a new generation of Lego enthusiasts. The lengthy 4,500-piece build includes clever engineering twists to get wall angles and rotations just right. It contains all kinds of hidden chambers and secrets for emergent storytelling and display placement of the 22 included mini-figs.

$400 | *lego.com*



❶ THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE PREMIUM FIGURES

Jakks Pacific has a long history of releasing great-looking collectibles from the Mario universe, so it's no surprise we're getting a new line tied to the anticipated movie adaptation. The colorful new 5-inch figure line includes Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad, each with an accessory from the film and impressive articulation.

$20 | *jakks.com*

❷ DREAM CONTROLLER SWITCH PRO

While there are plenty of third-party options that alter the form factor or inputs for playing on Nintendo's modern console, the Switch Pro Controller is already an outstanding performer. If your main goal is a cosmetic twist on the already familiar functionality, Dream Controller offers a variety of skins, colors, and customization tools to make the controller your own, including some drawn from established anime, movie, and game properties.

$170 | *dreamcontroller.com*

❸ FROSTPUNK: THE BOARD GAME

A wonderful adaptation of the excellent video game, the Frostpunk board game challenges up to four players to work together to keep their city alive against the odds. It's a big game with many components and strategic depth, but excellently written rules and an elegant structure keep it from feeling unwieldy. That doesn't mean it's easy. Eking out a win in this brutal frozen wasteland will always feel unlikely, and that's part of the charm.

$120 | *shop.asmodee.com*

❹ MEEPLE DESIGN BOARD GAME POSTERS

Meeple Design's striking silhouette-style posters draw from a range of beloved board gaming properties, like Terraforming Mars, Dominion, Betrayal at House on the Hill, and Codenames. The company leverages those properties to create understated but colorful posters that help you celebrate your favorite games. Available in multiple sizes to best suit your wall space, the posters are matte and museum quality, and arrive ready to frame.

Starting at $23 | *meepledesign.com*

❺ ANKER CHARGING DOCK FOR META QUEST 2

The Quest 2 is a great and affordable option for enjoying home VR, but surprisingly few good storage and charging options exist. The best we've encountered is Anker's sleek unit, which adds rechargeable batteries for the controllers and a simple USB-C nub on the headset's side that magnetically clicks into the storage base. It's a simple and useful way to stow away your Quest 2 and have it ready to go when it's time to play again.

$100 | *anker.com*

❻ V-SERIES POWER 4-OUTLET

Austere's strong reputation for premium surge protectors is on display in this wall outlet setup. The device offers electrical noise filtration for the most sensitive equipment, excellent safety and surge protection, four AC outlets (with generous space for even the widest plugs), and three rapid-charging USB slots. That's all in a visual design that looks at home beside your high-end setup and without taking up floor space since it plugs directly into the wall.

$100 | *austere.com*

❼ SONY INZONE M3 GAMING MONITOR

If you're looking for an admirable desktop gaming screen for console or PC gaming but you're not quite ready to spring for the more feature-rich M9 (which retails for about $900), the 27-inch M3 is a worthy compromise. The 1080p visuals run with a 240 Hz refresh rate, gorgeous color spectrum coverage, surprisingly wide viewing angles, G-Sync compatibility to reduce screen tearing, and an overall look that pairs nicely with the white/black PS5 aesthetics. It's a solid performer that won't break the bank.

$500 | *electronics.sony.com*

❽ PATHFINDER: RUSTY DRAGON INN BOX SET

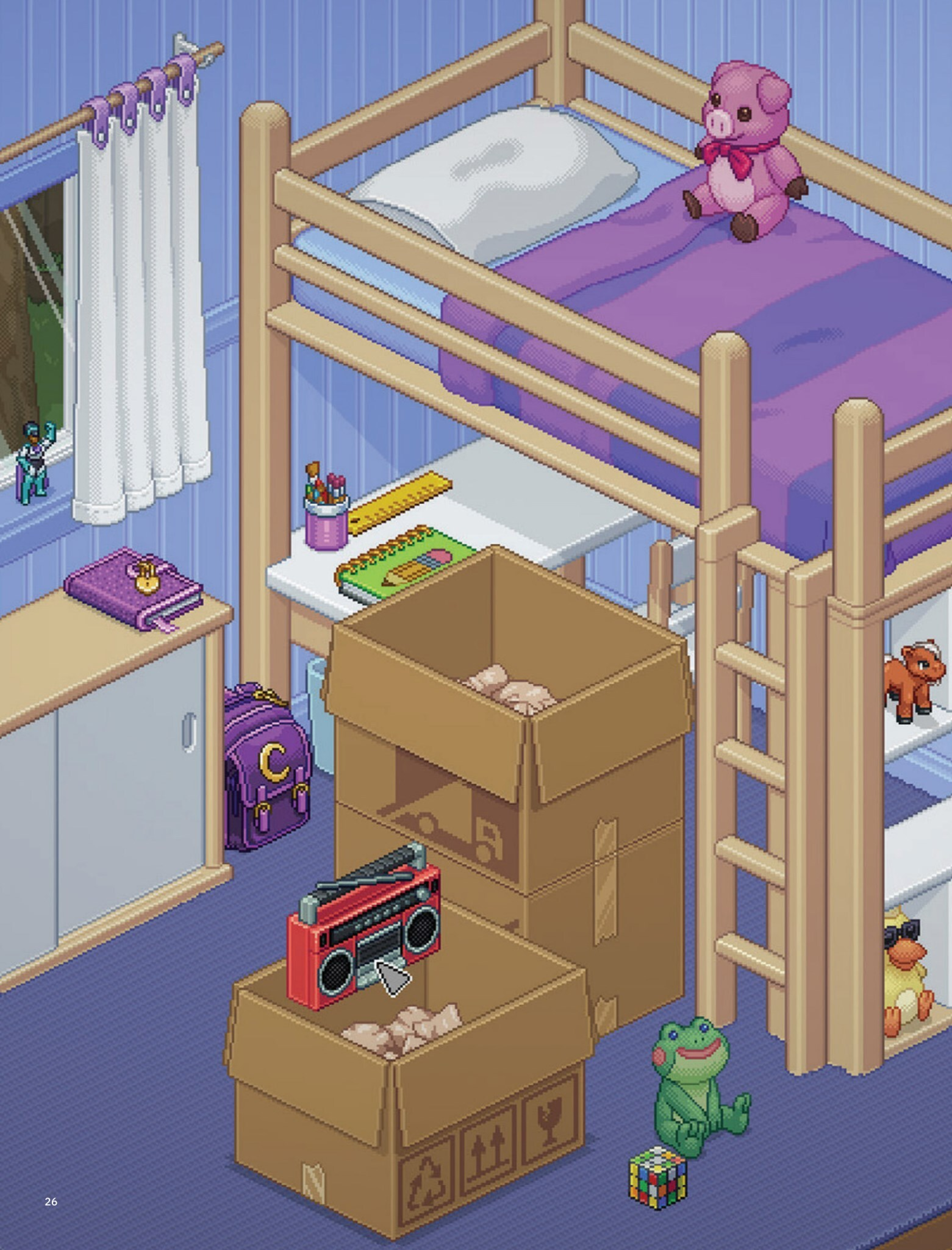
A revival of sorts for a much-beloved set of minis from 2016, the Rusty Dragon Inn includes an impressive collection of over 50 characters, monsters, and accessories to populate your ongoing Pathfinder sessions. The sculpts and paintwork are great, but the variety of miniatures in one robust collector's set is the real value here, as the included options are enough to fuel many adventures.

$200 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❾ COUCHMASTER CYBOSS

If you want the comfort of your sofa combined with the ideal surface for working or gaming on a laptop, the Cyboss couch desk is well worth a look. Two large side cushions (with included side pockets for accessory storage) support the bamboo desk surface, which features a ventilation grill to keep your machine cool, a cupholder space, and a tablet holder to holster desired devices upright. The whole setup nicely balances comfort and versatility. ■

$175 | *us.nerdytec.com*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SAY G'DAY

The rise of the Australian indie game

BY SARAH THWAITES

Gamescom 2022's Australian Pavilion was the biggest country partnership in the event's history. With 36 studios showcasing games, it was bustling with creatives from all over the country, and in the wake of the Australian Government's plans for a Digital Games Tax Offset, there was much cause for celebration.

Boasting BAFTAs, D.I.C.E Awards, and Golden Joysticks, the creativity pouring out of Australia is undeniable. To understand how the country's indie games have impacted the industry over the past few years, I spoke to several developers, exploring the phenomenon and the factors that made it possible.

Pivot To Video (Games)

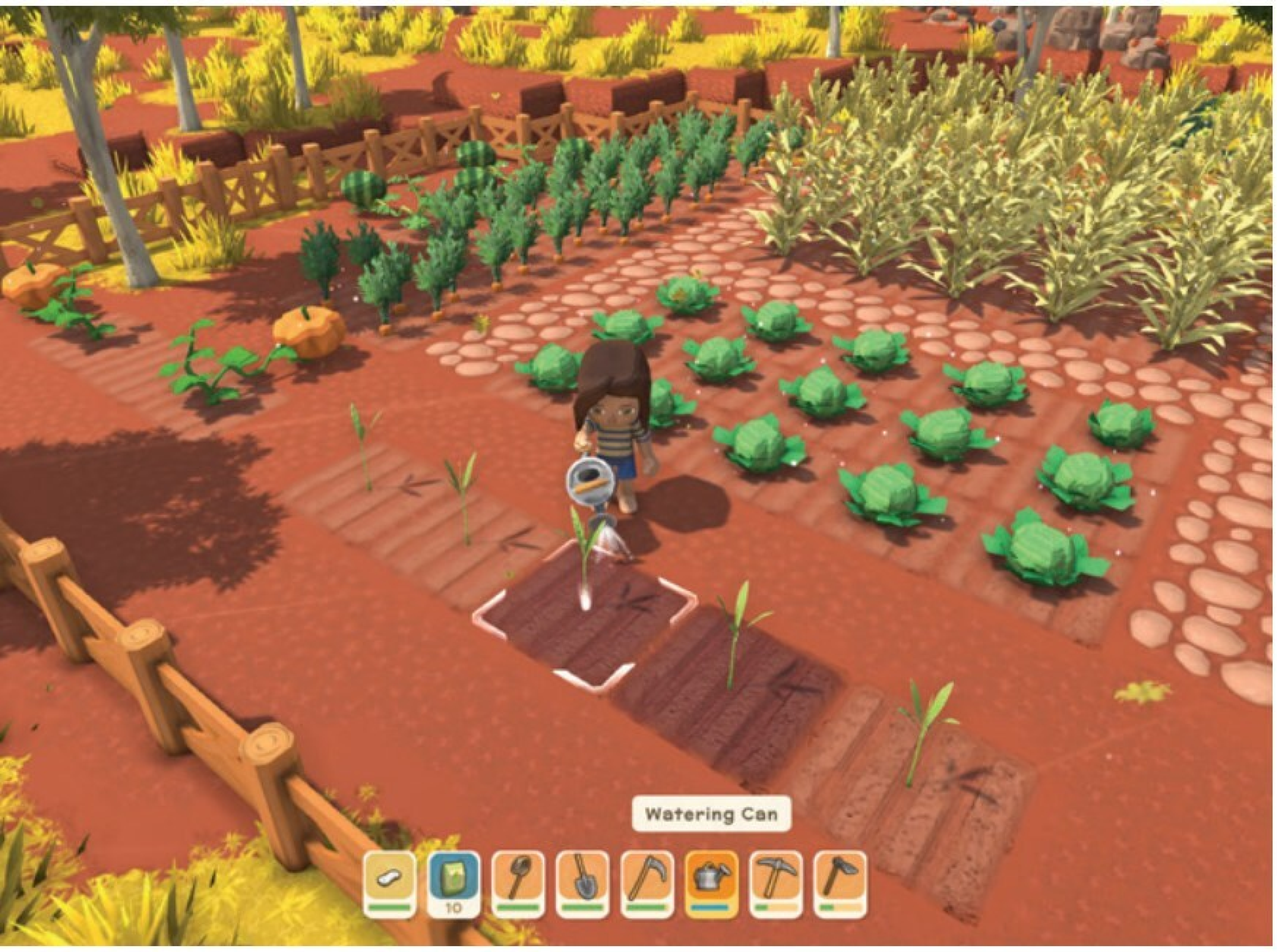
Unable to transfer his retail job after moving to New South Wales, James Bendon made a deal with his wife. For one year, he wanted to work on Dinkum, a lifestyle farming sim set in a fantasy land inspired by Australia. A year quickly turned into three – and eventually five. “I just wanted to finish something because I’ve made so many prototypes that I haven’t shown anyone except friends and family,” Bendon says.

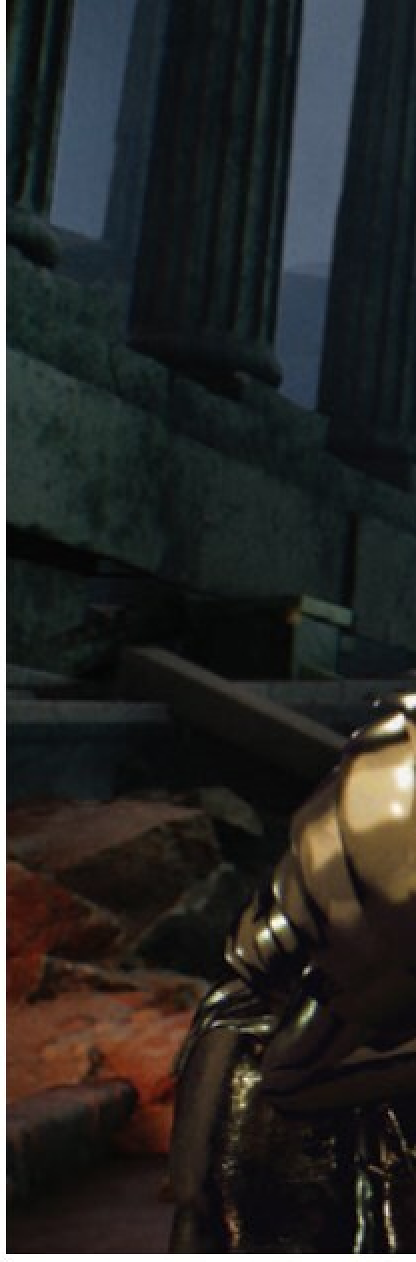
While Bendon still considers Dinkum unfinished, it launched into Steam Early Access in July of 2022 and now sports an “Overwhelmingly Positive” rating with almost 10,000 user reviews. “My wish list numbers indicated a reasonable amount of people would buy the game, enough that maybe I would make minimum wage for the five years I worked on it,” says Bendon, who didn’t receive any government support during development.

Where larger studios have been eligible for grants and support, many small-scale studios don’t qualify, leaving some to self-finance their ideas or let them go in favor of stable employment with bigger teams. Bendon believes the support available is extremely valuable, but the government could do more.

Now based in Far North Queensland, he finds it isolating for rural developers. Where booming capital cities boast international events, limited access to those meetups can make finding a sense of community difficult. This isolation can push talent into capital cities, which is a costly option for those just starting.

James Bendon’s Dinkum ↖





In 2010, Nick Pearce began modding Skyrim while working as a “very bored lawyer” in Melbourne, Victoria. Twelve years later, that process would net him a BAFTA nomination.

The Forgotten City is a time-traveling mystery set in an ancient underground city. From 2012 to 2015, Pearce spent 1,700 hours working on that concept in Bethesda’s Creation Kit, a tool used to mod Skyrim. After uploading it to Nexus Mods, it made history as the first mod to receive an Australian Writers Guild Award. The ceremony rewards excellence in writing in more orthodox mediums, like film and TV, so a video game breaking through made waves.

“I realized making story-driven games was all I wanted to do,” Pearce says. “I looked for work, but there were no interesting jobs here in Australia at the time. Necessity being the mother of invention, I quit my job and founded my own studio.”

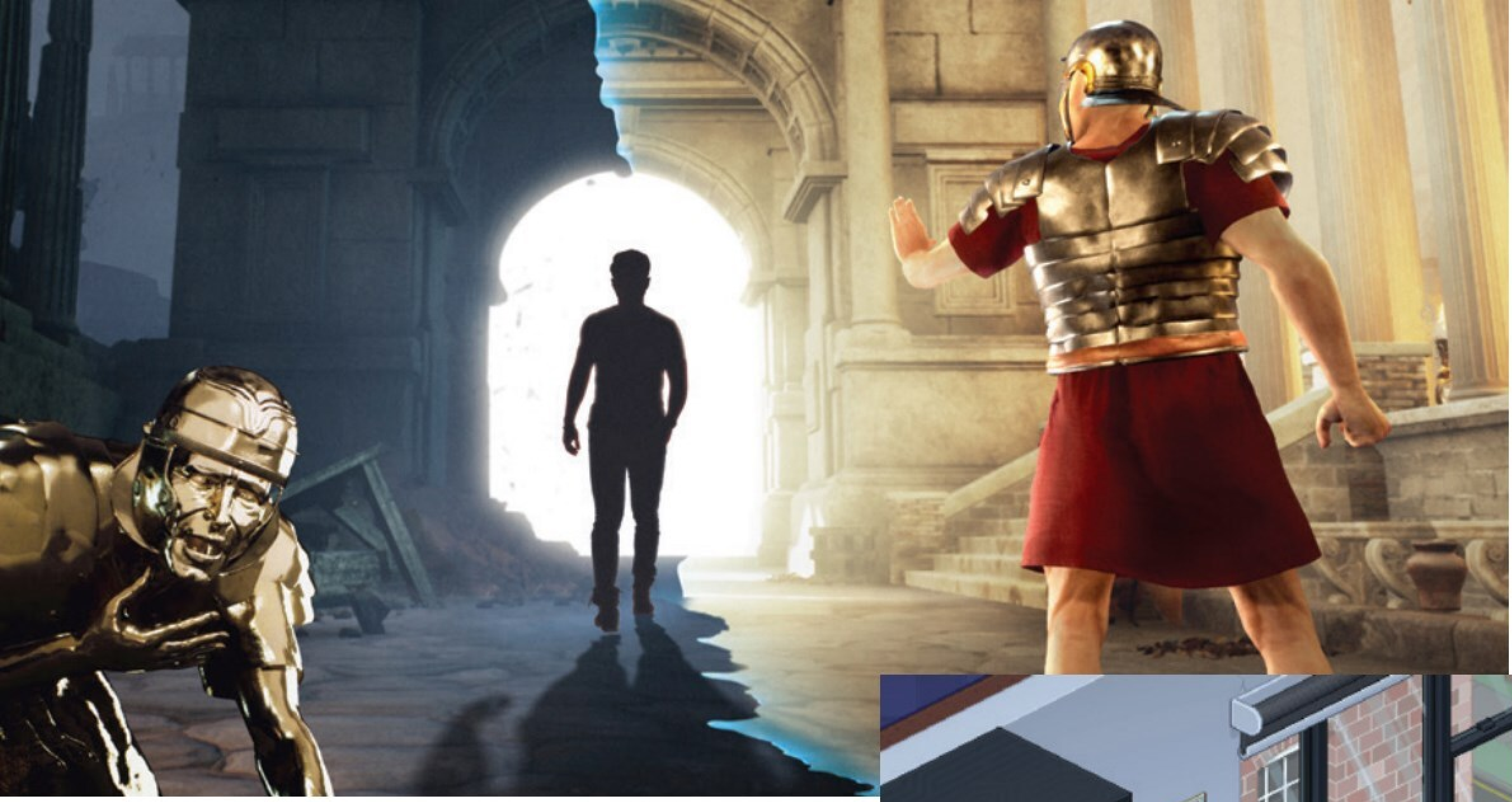
With some help from the government creative development agency VicScreen and years of professional development, Pearce’s studio, Modern Storyteller, rebuilt the mod into a brand-new beast. The Forgotten City launched in 2021 to both critical and commercial acclaim. *Game Informer* called it “a beautifully penned story loaded with meaningful player choice.”

Currently, Australia doesn’t house many large studios, which is instrumental in fostering a strong community of indie developers. “We have a lot of brave developers out there in the indie wilderness, helping each other thanks to the sense of camaraderie and taking big creative risks because they don’t have corporate overlords telling them what to make,” Pearce says.

Even so, there is a delicate balance at play right now. For small developers, funding and infrastructure is a dream. But with the push for more triple-A studios to build offices and potentially poach independent talent, the scene’s most innovative ideas could be shelved in favor of a different cause.

Pearce is hopeful that “the establishment of some bigger studios and the growth of some successful indies will create a lot of jobs for the juniors here, and train them up, so there are more skilled senior staff too. But that’ll take time.”

In Australia, this access cap disproportionately affects those with limited income. But with open-source tools and free online tutorials, doors are opening slowly, allowing a wider range of people to tell their stories.



Left: Modern Storyteller's The Forgotten City

Bottom: Witch Beam's Unpacking

"Australian video games can be fun, creative works that explore personal topics. They can also aid tourism and interest in Australia, teach lessons about culture, and engage people of all ages," says Leah Williams, journalist and content lead for Australian games site *GamesHub*.

But despite their positive impact, outdated media coverage regarding violence in video games – paired with years of age rating and classification debates – have left a mark. A long-standing disconnect between video game communities and governing bodies has caused serious friction. It wasn't until 2013 that the Australian Government approved an R 18+ rating, allowing games featuring mature themes to be sold. Yet even with this change, games like 2021's Disco Elysium: The Final Cut can still be refused classification due to its depiction of adult themes, like drug use, sex, and violence.

The Stress Of Moving (On)

Sanatana Mishra, Tim Dawson, and Jeff Van Dyke met at SEGA Studios Australia, working on games in the Total War series and Castle of Illusion starring Mickey Mouse. They were in the early stages of their careers, and the triple-A cycle was making them antsy. "The way we were making games was unhealthy in a lot of ways... people don't get into games to make bad things in unhealthy, physically painful ways," Mishra says.

Van Dyke left first, followed by Dawson. After Mishra was unsuccessful in looking for a new role, they suggested to Dawson that they try something new. "I said, 'Why don't we just kind of try our own thing? Because we were young enough, and on that precipice, you know, late 20s, where you can completely fail at life, and then maybe still have another chance," Mishra says.

In 2013, with very little money behind them, the duo took the plunge, founding an indie studio called Witch Beam. Quickly finding they didn't possess all the skills necessary to realize their ambitions, old friend Jeff Van Dyke re-entered the picture as Witch Beam's composer and sound designer.

Screen Australia's Interactive Games Fund, a government-led program that's supported Aussie developers like Defiant Developments, makers of the Hand of Fate series, provided Witch Beam with a $50,000 grant. Mishra stresses the importance of this state funding, as local funding was far behind in its understanding of the industry.

"[The Interactive Games Fund] disappeared six months after we got it," Mishra explains. "We kept our grant, which was good, but for everyone else... it was kind of like a resurgence of game development in Australia, and then a dark age immediately ensued, where only the companies that had gotten significant support were able to flourish for a little while."

In lighter news, Screen Australia announced in July 2022 that it was funding 31 Aussie-made games as part of its Games: Expansion Pack fund, hopefully making way for another resurgence. And in January 2023, the new Labour government announced it was reviving The Australian Interactive Games Fund. After the dramatic pull in funding by the Liberal Government Mishra describes happening a decade earlier, this new influx of money and support is a positive step that will breathe more life into the flourishing indie scene in Australia.

After a "grueling" five years of development, Witch Beam's first game, Assault Android Cactus, garnered praise from critics in 2015, but a lack of commercial success pushed the Brisbane-based team toward its next project. Enter Wren Brier, a game artist and narrative designer Mishra describes as "the soul" of Unpacking. Brier worked with Witch Beam to bring this heartwarming zen puzzler – in which you arrange your possessions to fit in a series of pixelated homes – to fruition.

With its impactful underlying story, Unpacking was an overwhelming success, delivering Witch Beam Game of the Year nominations, GDC awards, and even two BAFTAs. Soon after, the team was in several meetings with companies looking to invest, asking for the next game. "It boiled down to us talking internally and going, 'Even if somebody gave us a bunch of money in an investment, what would we do with it,'" Mishra says. "It was just not for us because we think our games are good because we make them."

While overseas events have featured scores of Aussie games, the country itself houses two large conventions, often to sold-out crowds: PAX Aus and Melbourne International Games Week. While Nintendo, PlayStation, and Xbox gave them a miss in 2022 and are generally distancing themselves from having space on consumer convention show floors, this only creates more opportunities to shift the focus inward.

Williams mentions spotting Shuhei Yoshida, Head of PlayStation Indies, at this year's PAX Aus. "According to reports from local studios, he spent a lot of time in PAX Rising checking out Australian games, and I know his presence and interest was encouraging for a lot of developers."

"PAX definitely felt like an indie showcase this year," Mishra says. Instead of funneling consumers towards triple-A booths as in previous years, the indies were situated right near the entrance in 2022. "What we have here now is Australian-owned and operated businesses that are not reliant on somebody sitting in San Francisco doing a mathematical calculation, and that's awesome."

Resurgence And Resurrection

Like many great success stories, Massive Monster's origins lay in the death of an industry. Specifically, Flash, a software system with a famously tragic end that pushed a lot of developers into the greener pastures of games. At least, that's what happened with Julian Wilton, Jay Armstrong, and James Pearmain.

After finding success with a cheery first game, The Adventure Pals, the team had another brush with death in the form of Never Give Up, a hardcore platformer with a darker tone that turned out to be a massive flop. "Despite its name, we should have given up on it," Wilton says. "It nearly brought an end to the company." The trio took the knock and moved forward, working on its next project, Cult of the Lamb.

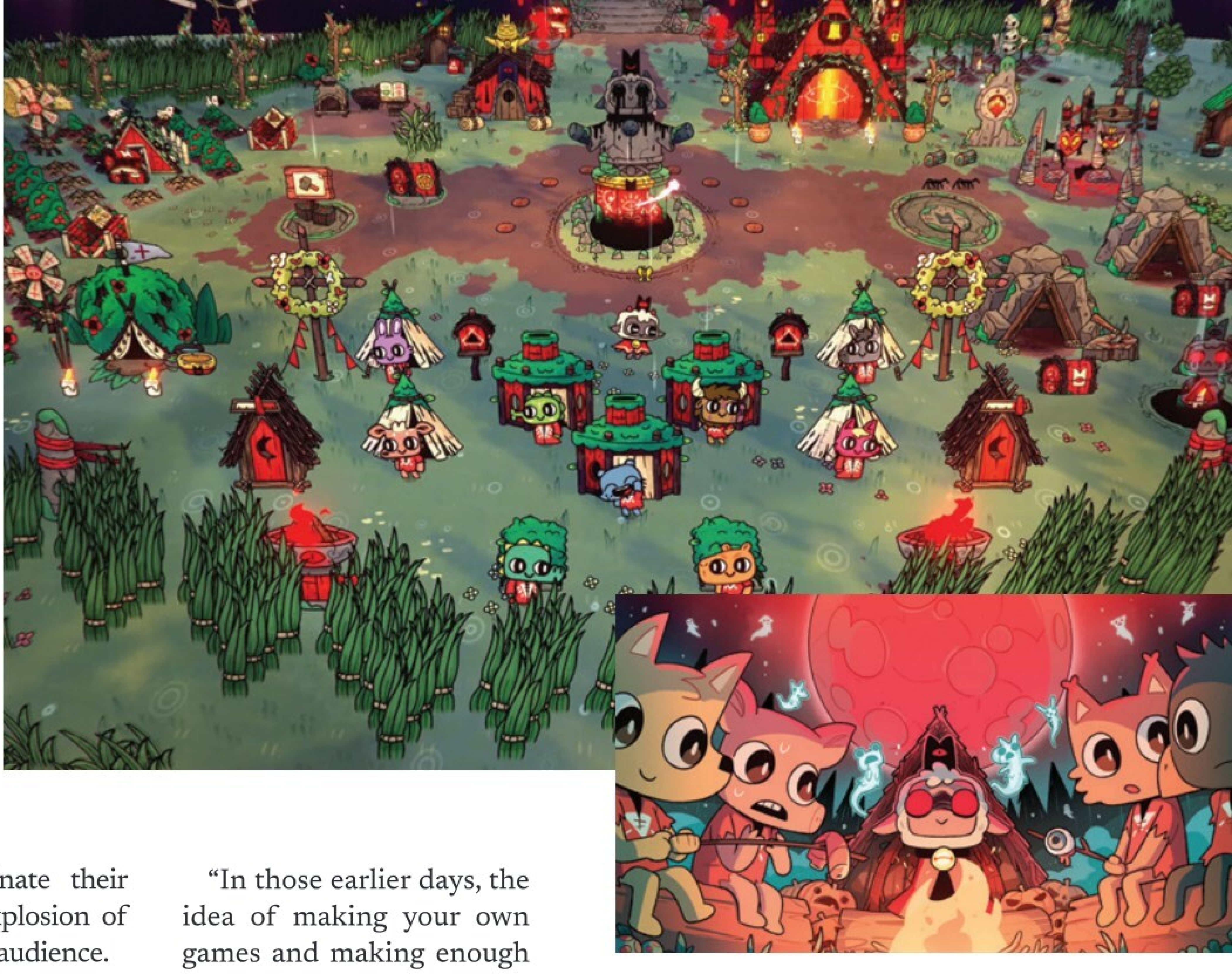
Left: All Possible Future's The Plucky Squire

Bottom: Witch Beam's Assault Android Cactus

↖

Cult's humble origins lay in a prototype that mixed a roguelike dungeon crawler with a base-building colony simulator. The team all agreed it had potential. "We tried many ideas, from flying on the back of a giant whale to creating and running your own hell," Wilton says. Ultimately, Wilton's love of horror led the team to focus on the occult.

A heavy focus on Twitch gave Massive Monster an advantage. "Devolver Digital [Cult of the Lamb's publisher] knew that the game would translate very well to streamers and their audience due to their relationship," Wilton said. Massive Monster added Twitch integration. Streamers could indoctrinate their viewers live on air, which led to an explosion of views, helping Cult of the Lamb find an audience.



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Massive Monster's Cult of the Lamb

The power of social media has helped Australian developers like Massive Monster spread their creative messages to the world. "There are few opportunities to take your game to the next level in Australia, and once they venture out [overseas], it can be hard for them to get their foot in the door," says Wilton. "We need more platforms and critical players to continue to make their way down here to connect to the industry through Melbourne International Games Week rather than us going to them."

Games industry veterans Jonathan Biddle and James Turner met working at UK developer Blue52 at the turn of the century. Nearly 20 years later, they founded their own indie studio, All Possible Futures. Turner had moved to Japan to conceptualize Pokémon for Game Freak, while Biddle, who recently relocated to Australia, had been designing games like Stealth Bastard and The Swords of Ditto, evocative of their shared inspiration – Nintendo. The duo is currently working on The Plucky Squire, a dimension-crossing adventure that Devolver Digital picked up.

Despite their shared experience, Biddle's relocation to Australia offered a new perspective. "My experience is limited here, but it seems that the challenges are largely the same as in Europe, just a little more acute. Can I make this idea off my own back? Will I find a publisher willing to support me?"

As the former Design Director of publisher Curve Digital, Biddle has observed the rise of indie games throughout their career. But the relative youth of Australia's scene means it's unencumbered by some of the older establishment ways of thinking.

"In those earlier days, the idea of making your own games and making enough money to make more was really kind of a fantasy," they say. "The democratization of game development engines like Unity and Unreal has dramatically changed that. Early on in my career, games were very much made by the same type of people with the same types of ideas. Now the medium is much more open, and anyone is able to express themselves with it."

The Australian game industry has growing pains. Government-backed tax incentives will help, but despite all the awards and attention, there are sizable hurdles to clear. "The newly announced federal Digital Games Tax Offset is only relevant to companies spending a minimum of AU $500,000 on video game development projects," Williams said. As a result, smaller independent developers may miss out on support from federal programs.

Targeted regional investment and support for underrepresented groups within the space are needed to help fortify a diverse range of stories. More opportunities for prospective developers to train and get industry jobs without living in Australia's major cities are also necessary. Organizations like Indigitek, a non-profit focused on increasing the participation of Indigenous people in the technology sector, will play an important part in the industry's overall success going forward. By amplifying more voices and stories, everyone reaps the benefits.

Difficulties aside, developers in the scene share an overwhelming sense of optimism, whether they're a few games deep or just working on their debut. The watchful eye of the world is welcomed in Australia. In fact, you could say it's invited. ■

TO INTERSTELLAR AND BEYOND

How Kerbal Space Program 2 brings all the stars closer to home

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

The idea of exploring space and explaining what it is, in some form, has been with humankind since its beginning . We looked to the Sun and the Moon to tell time before we invented clocks. We worshipped gods among the stars and questioned Earth's place in the universe for millennia. Still today, space and everything beyond our atmosphere remains a frontier for discovery, ranging from exploratory fascination to outright existentialism. It's no surprise that throughout history, media has explored space using the great unknown to entertain, inform, and even terrorize. But with each passing year, our knowledge of that great unknown grows exponentially, met by even more questions about what's above our heads.

Nothing closes the gap for me between Earth, where I've planted my feet firmly, and the expanse beyond, which I'll likely never experience, more than games. I've been a space-faring astronaut, a galaxy-jumping mercenary, an extraterrestrial scientist, and more because of games. Despite my love of space and exploring it with a controller, I've only watched developer Squad's Kerbal Space Program from afar.

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (Multiplayer TBD) **PUBLISHER** Private Division **DEVELOPER** Intercept Games
RELEASE February 24 (Early Access)

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

For the uninitiated, Kerbal Space Program (KSP) first released in 2011 as arguably one of the most realistic rocket launch simulator games ever made. The game's objective remains largely the same today, more than a decade later: build a rocket and launch it into space.

That original release was laughably primitive. Compared to what KSP is today, a feature-complete product with praiseworthy mod support, two expansions, and a community that still puts thousands of hours into the game each year, the original version of the game feels like a distant fever dream. I've played KSP a few times over the years, but I found myself put off quickly by just how "simulator" it is. You're not actually building a real-life rocket and launching it into space, but the game makes you feel like you are, and it can be overwhelming. It's a game that launched past me long ago, and I could never catch up today without a drastic rework of how I spend my time. And yet, I jumped at the opportunity to preview Kerbal Space Program 2 (KSP2), the sequel that launched into early access on February 24, earlier in the month.

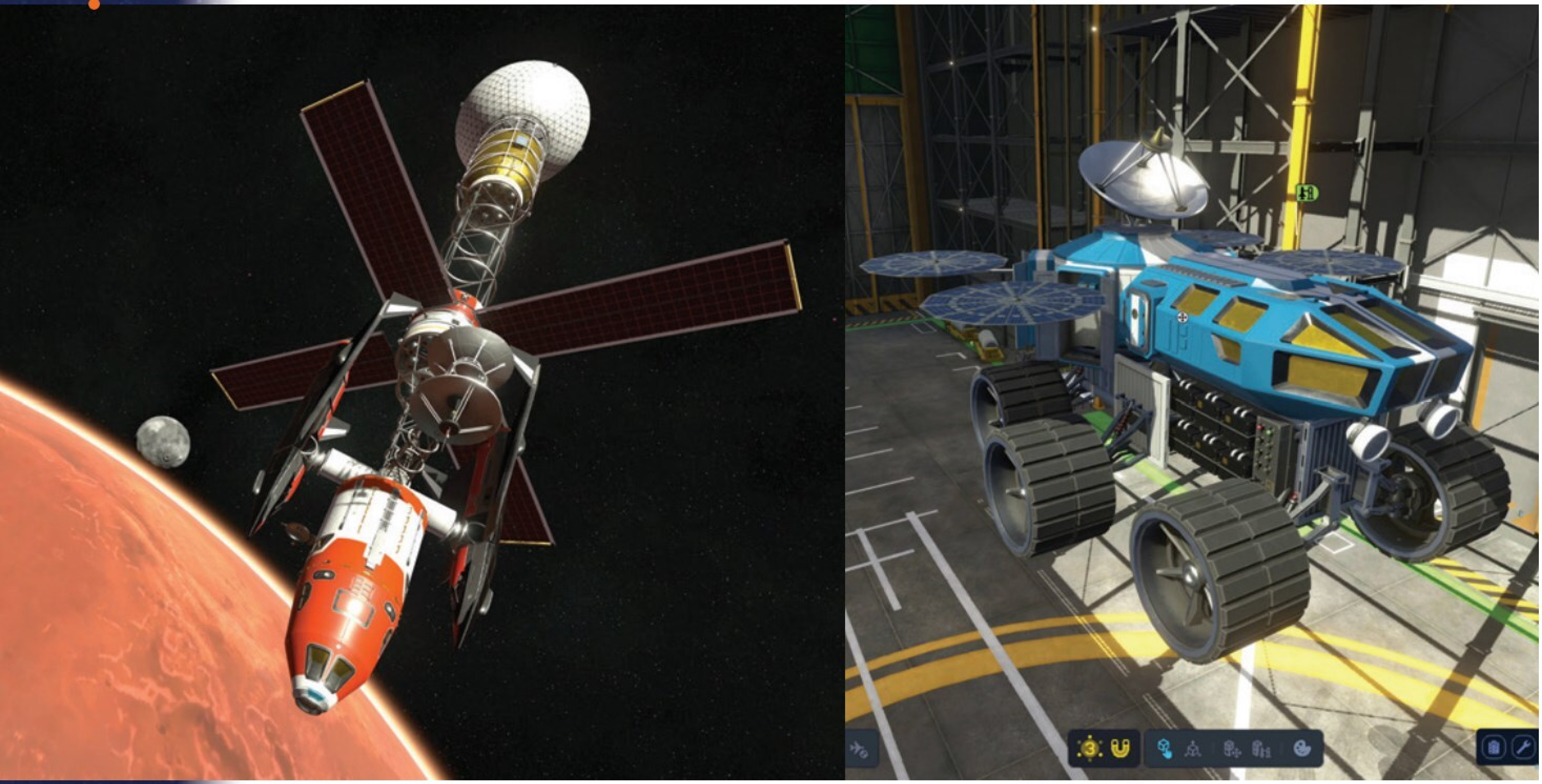
Developed by Intercept Games, KSP2 is an intergalactic jump for the series in more ways than one. Or, at least, it will be one day. What's available now in early access is a significantly more beautiful, more intuitive KSP with many features of the first game, like science, stripped back to allow the community to help chart the future of KSP2. Its current feature set revolves around a reworked Vehicle Assembly Building, tutorials aimed at bringing new players in by reducing the friction felt in the first game, and new parts to bring the series into 2023.

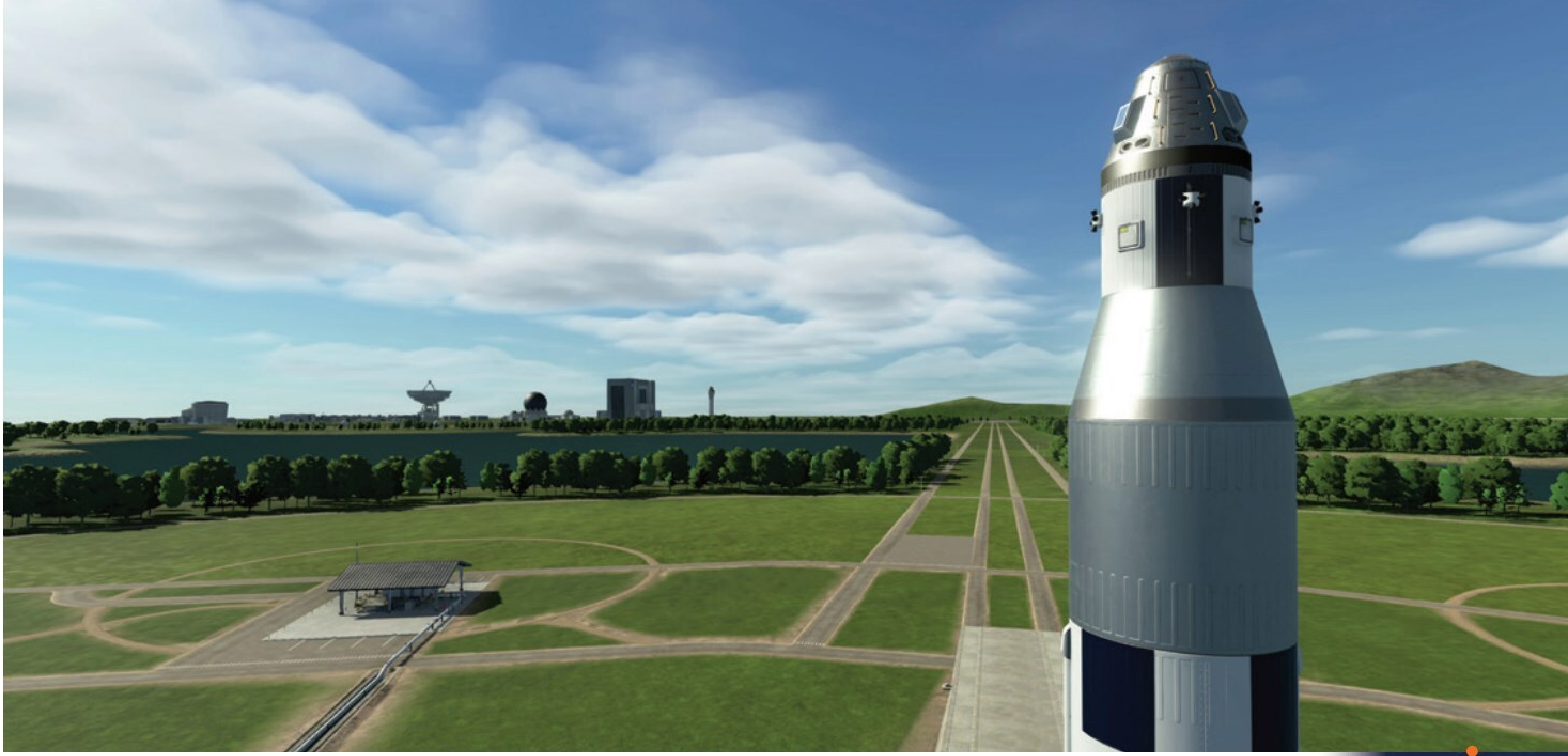
"Kerbal is a game that has been through development for 10 years [and] things have changed in terms of user experience and approachability tools. Kerbal 2 gives us a chance to get a fresh look at all of that and see what really applies here," Kerbal Space Program 2 lead designer Shana Markham tells me next to a window overlooking the European Space Agency research and technology center multimedia room, roughly an hour drive outside Amsterdam, where I played some of the game for the first time.

Art director Kristina Ness picks up from Markham, noting how the team feels "blind a bit to that first user experience." She says that the day's preview, which consists of a few dozen people, mostly well-known KSP players and streamers, is a demo for people like me but a playtest for the team.

"Part of this... coming in fresh with everyone, is hearing what you all are experiencing as well, and what new players want to see in the game," Ness says. "And throughout early access, we will compare feedback that we get from players, both new and old alike, to what we're planning on internally, and how we can just continue to ease the barrier to entry."

Kerbal Space Program 2 features a new reworked Vehicle Assembly Building, aimed at making creating new starships and planet rovers much simpler for newcomers and more in-depth for longtime players





Every part of Kerbal Space Program 2's visuals have received an upgrade, including what's happening in space and down on Kerbin

FASCINATION IN FAILURE

Ness, Markham, and the rest of the Intercept team should be proud of KSP2's tutorials. Having played through the first game's "tutorials" (if you can call these complex and over-assuming missions that) just days before my preview trip to Amsterdam, I could see just how much work Intercept put into the sequel's onboarding process. KSP2 features colorful and cheery cutscenes that utilize 1960s-esque space-race nostalgia to showcase what you're doing and how you're doing it, accompanied by text written for people like me with no real knowledge of how rocket launches work. The game highlights the parts I'm supposed to use and guides me to drag them to precisely the right spot, explaining why each step of the way.

Perhaps the biggest compliment I can give the sequel's reworked onboarding process is that in less than 15 minutes, I was able to build a rocket and launch it into space. Surprising myself more, I felt pushed to return to the Vehicle Assembly Building to tinker away at an attempt to build a rocket twice as big and launch it into space. I eventually succeeded with each self-imposed objective. Each rocket launched into space on the shoulders of knowledge I acquired after failing multiple times because KSP2, like its predecessor, is designed with that kind of failure in mind first.

"Failure is a sliding scale for Kerbal," Markham tells me when asked why KSP2 trailers highlight the importance and fun of failing so often in-game. "We have a designer who joined our team recently and his only goal is whatever mission he does, Jeb [the name for his green Minion-like astronaut inside his rocket that reacts in real-time to the physics of your launch] has to come back home. And so, he encounters failures along the way, but that's okay because that's now just the catalyst for the next mission. And so it's trying to figure out like, 'Well, what happened here?' And that sparks its own stories."

Markham says part of the Kerbal experience is building for failure, which I quickly picked up on while playing the game during my two-hour demo. I would attach a new part to my rocket, go to the launch pad, skip the fun countdown sequence to expedite the launch and watch if my rocket even left the ground. It took me less than 20 seconds to do all that, and with a quick click, I could return to the Vehicle Assembly Building to tinker with my rocket again, tweaking what I thought did or didn't work. Embarrassingly, my biggest problem was attaching too many rockets without enough fuel sources. But discovering a possible fix, heading back to the launch pad, and watching the rocket lift off the ground left a massive smile on my face. In the corniest of ways, I wanted to punch my fist into the air, as if I was part of NASA and had just helped a rocket head to space.

But that glee was not unique to me. It's something I saw on the faces of those around me. Knowing I was surrounded by people whose entire online existence revolves around KSP – just the day before, I spoke to someone with a jaw-dropping 15,000 hours in the first game who viewed the forthcoming early access launch of KSP2 as a new chapter in his streaming career – I couldn't help but take my hands off the mouse and keyboard to watch what they were building. What took me an hour to build took them minutes, and what I made during the demo paled in comparison to the lifelike rockets and jets they created in KSP2.

KERBAL
esa Columbus
esa

We were some of the first people to publicly play Kerbal Space Program 2 and we did so in the museum-like facility of the ESA ESTEC's Highbay Multimedia Room

The same night Intercept Games celebrated its first public preview showing of Kerbal Space Program 2, SpaceX celebrated the successful ignition of its massive 33-engine Starship

INSPIRATION AMONGST THE STARS

Going hands-on with KSP2 was fun in its own right. Beyond my build-a-rocket-and-launch-it efforts, Intercept also curated five scenarios players could build toward in the game. I was able to roll a rover around the fictional planet of Tylo, mess around with an interstellar vehicle – a new and upcoming feature on the game's development timeline – and of course, launch an expertly designed rocket from Kerbin, the game's take on Earth. These glimpses into what's possible were great, and I imagine those familiar with the series got even more out of this look ahead. Just as fascinating as all that was the opportunity to watch the most hardcore of the Kerbal community react in real-time to what the game allowed them to do.

They cheered as the developers played a never-before-seen trailer, and asked the team to play it again afterward. They asked questions I could never imagine, questions only 15,000 hours in the game would allow. During a fancy dinner in the planetarium of an Amsterdam zoo, they requested that a SpaceX rocket test happening at that very moment be streamed on the ceiling above; which is to say I enjoyed dinner to the sounds of people shouting in excitement that SpaceX's 33-engine starship – the most engines aboard a ship like this – passed its ignition test. Members of Private Division and Intercept gave heartfelt speeches on stage. Not long after, those same developers were at a table of people I recognized as deeply ingrained in the Kerbal community asking what they thought of the build. But it didn't feel like public relations asking to get a jump ahead of their thoughts; these devs were taking notes, seriously taking into account what these players enjoyed, didn't enjoy, and what they expected down the road.

Of course, having been flown out to Amsterdam, enjoying meals in once-in-a-lifetime ways, and playing a new space rocket simulator in the headquarters of the European Space Agency, I was aware the team was working hard to make this trip one for the books for all of us. And perhaps that's why I left this trip feeling so inspired about space, gaming's intersection with it, and the future of KSP2, a game I essentially had little knowledge of prior to this trip. But I can't shake the feeling that space simply is inspiring, and subsequently, so are games based in it.

"We are definitely aware of the impact this game has had and continues to have on players and kids and folks who are even just like, tangentially interested in aerospace and science," Ness says when I ask about the real-world impact Kerbal has had on the intersection of gaming and space-faring careers. "Sometimes it can feel scary. We are in many ways, I think, responsible, whether we want to be or not, for careers all over the world, but there's also something really joyful and special in that. Not everyone in the games industry can say that they are positively impacting people's lives this way."

Ness and Markham, and I imagine many others on the team, have stories about players who have approached them at shows like PAX or Gamescom to tell them KSP made them pursue their career. Markham recalls a player telling her they work at Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' space company, Blue Origin. It was that moment when it really struck her that she was helping develop something that stretched far beyond the virtual stars in Kerbal's "Kerbol" galaxy and into our world.

Kerbal has created careers closer to home, too. Chris Adderly began playing KSP roughly 10 years ago, his love of the game growing with each new update. When he thought of a feature not in the game that he wished was, he used his software engineering background to mod it in. Adderly began to gain traction in the Kerbal modding community and when he saw a position open up about a year and a half ago for parts design for KSP2, he applied. But he didn't hear back so he messaged KSP2 creative director Nate Simpson, with whom he had already fostered a relationship through the game, to wish the team good luck finding the right person for the job. When Simpson heard Adderly wasn't interviewed, he corrected course. You can now find his name in the game's credits as an official developer.

"It's a completely different experience than any other job I've had before and it feels really exciting to have a product that I've worked on, that's going to go out to so many people, and have them see our work and see what we've done and appreciate it," Adderly says, adding that he's most excited for players to go hands-on with the colonies feature being added at a later date. "You start your own space program and build it up so that you can launch from somewhere else [that isn't Kerbin]. That's sci-fi. It lets you bring sci-fi into the game in a way that keeps up with the physics of our reality. And that's really cool."

A BIG BANG BETWEEN SPACE AND GAMES

It's these kinds of stories and how KSP fuels them that excite European Space Agency crew technology and XR lab lead Lionel Ferra. He works at the European Astronaut Center in Cologne, Germany, using mixed, augmented, and virtual reality, and other technologies like artificial intelligence, to better support astronauts before, during, and after their flights. He started with the European Space Agency in 2006 as a crew instructor, but over time, more and more technology was integrated into his workspace, like robots. Realizing the need to explore new technologies, Ferra began to specialize in them. Now, he's a proponent of using video games and related software to advance space technology.

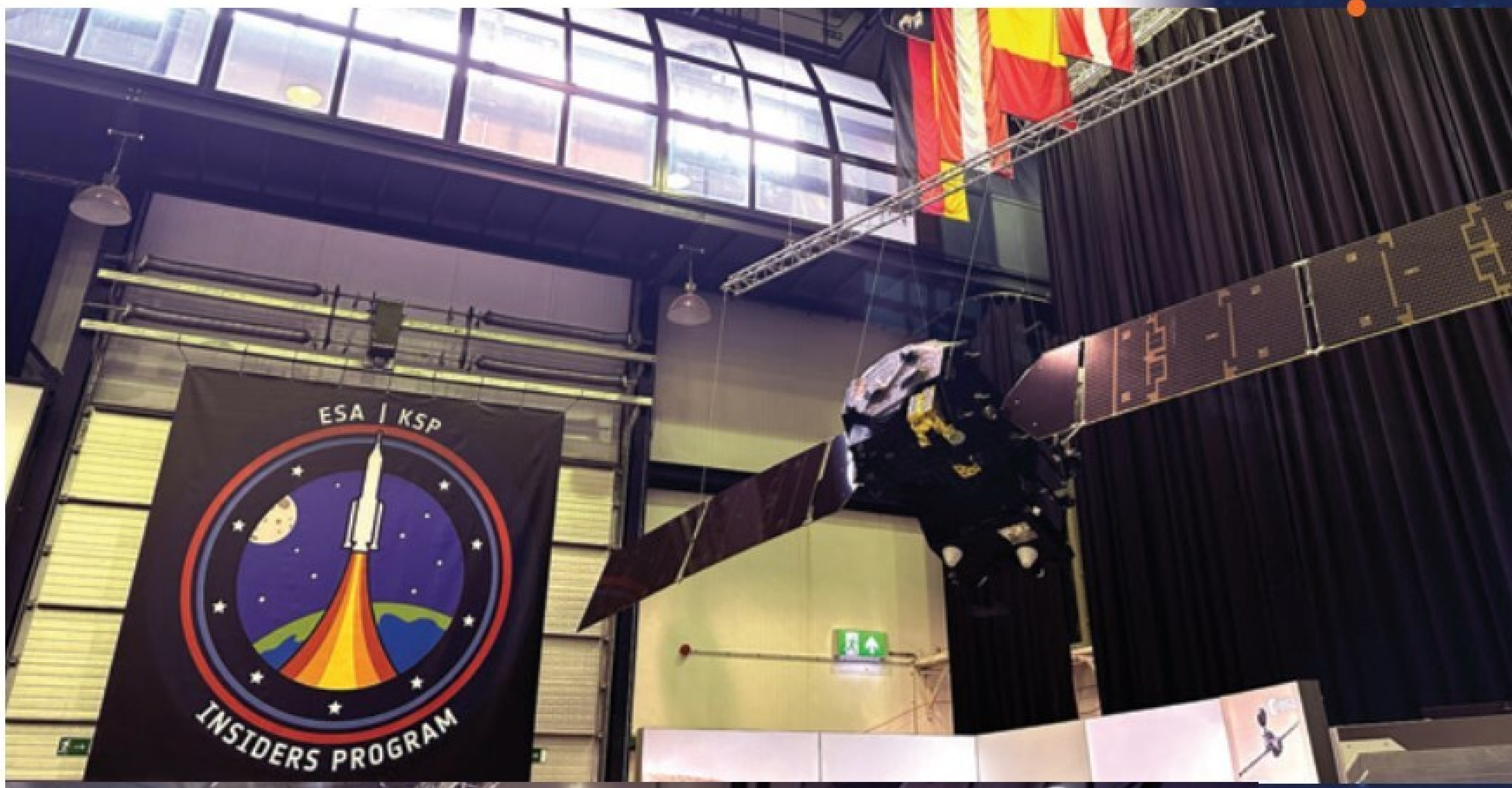
At a core level, he helped the European Space Agency realize that while the multi-country organization could create engines to power proprietary training software, it could also just use Epic's Unreal Engine and even Unity to save them the extra steps. Unreal Engine powers Fortnite, arguably the most popular game in the world. Ferra has also found that applicants who play video games are likely to excel faster than those who don't because they're already familiar with virtual interactions in a 3D space.

"It's not easy to teach how to be skilled in 3D environments," Ferra tells me. "You have to learn it. You have to learn by doing it. And I realized that the younger generation... when I put them in a classical space simulator, they get it pretty quickly. Much quicker."

He says the relationship between gaming and space science is a two-way street. "We learn from gaming," Ferra says. "We will always be behind because the gaming industry is the frontrunner of the computer industry. But I think there is a win-win situation. We learn from them, but when we partner with them, they can also learn from our side." They inspire each other in the same way sci-fi inspires our imagination of what's possible in space. One European Space Agency designer remarked that while Star Trek's "Communicator" didn't directly inspire folding cell phones, it's interesting that a device in Star Trek that was once seen as futuristic and farfetched became a reality.

While Intercept is quiet on what's in store for KSP2, it's clear a collaboration will likely happen with the agency again at some point.

Perhaps a futuristic and farfetched rocket built within KSP2 could become the blueprint for something in the real world in the future. If Ferra's right about the two-way street between gaming and space science, it's only a matter of time. And after everything I experienced during this trip, I hope to watch that rocket take off into space during my lifetime. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I'll do so from within a planetarium full of people who view KSP2 as more than just a game, but something imaginative and inspiring, something that allows us here on Earth to look beyond our galaxy and into the great beyond. ■

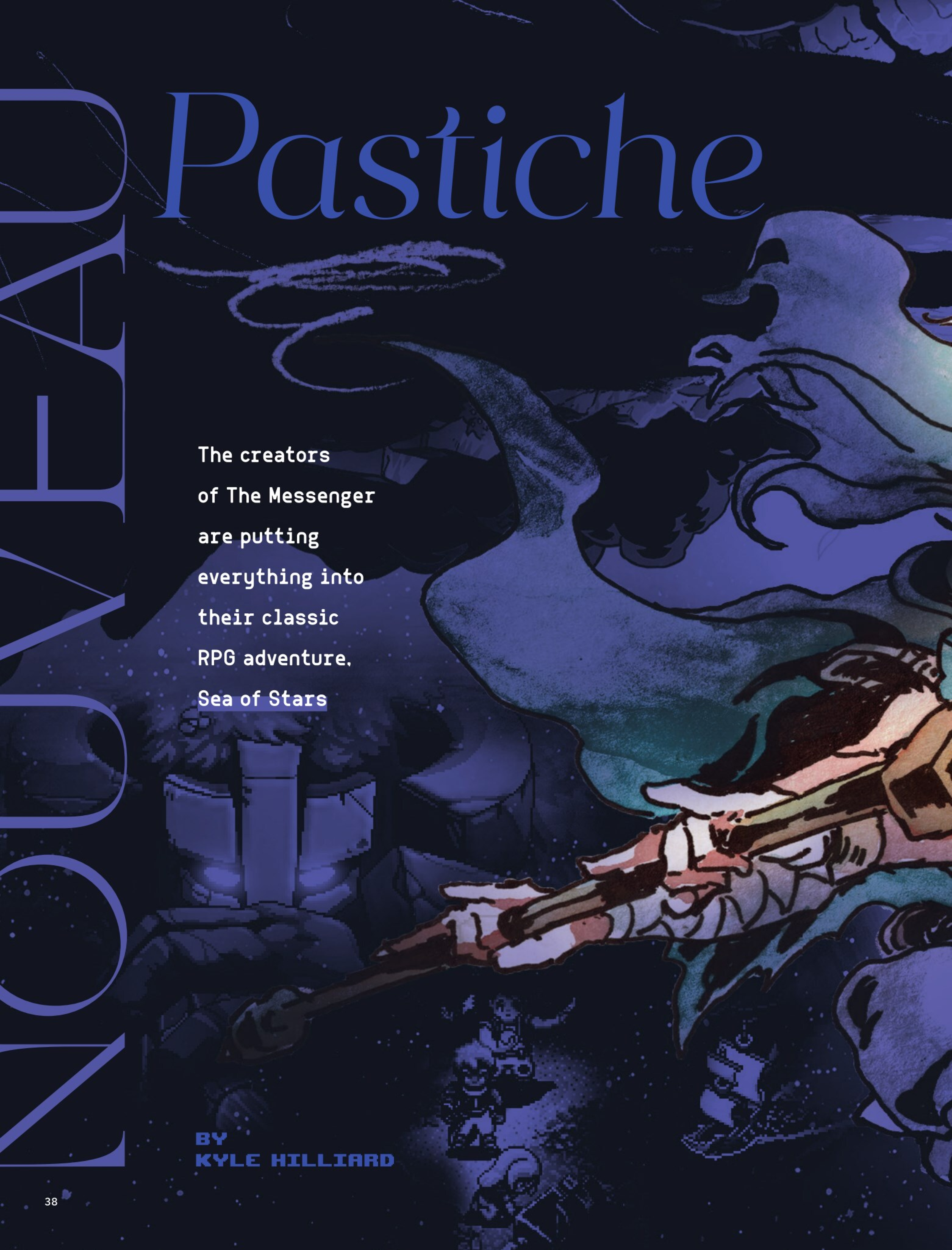


A scaled-down replica model of the ExoMars orbiter currently observing space and the Red Planet from Mars' orbit

NOUVEAU Pastiche

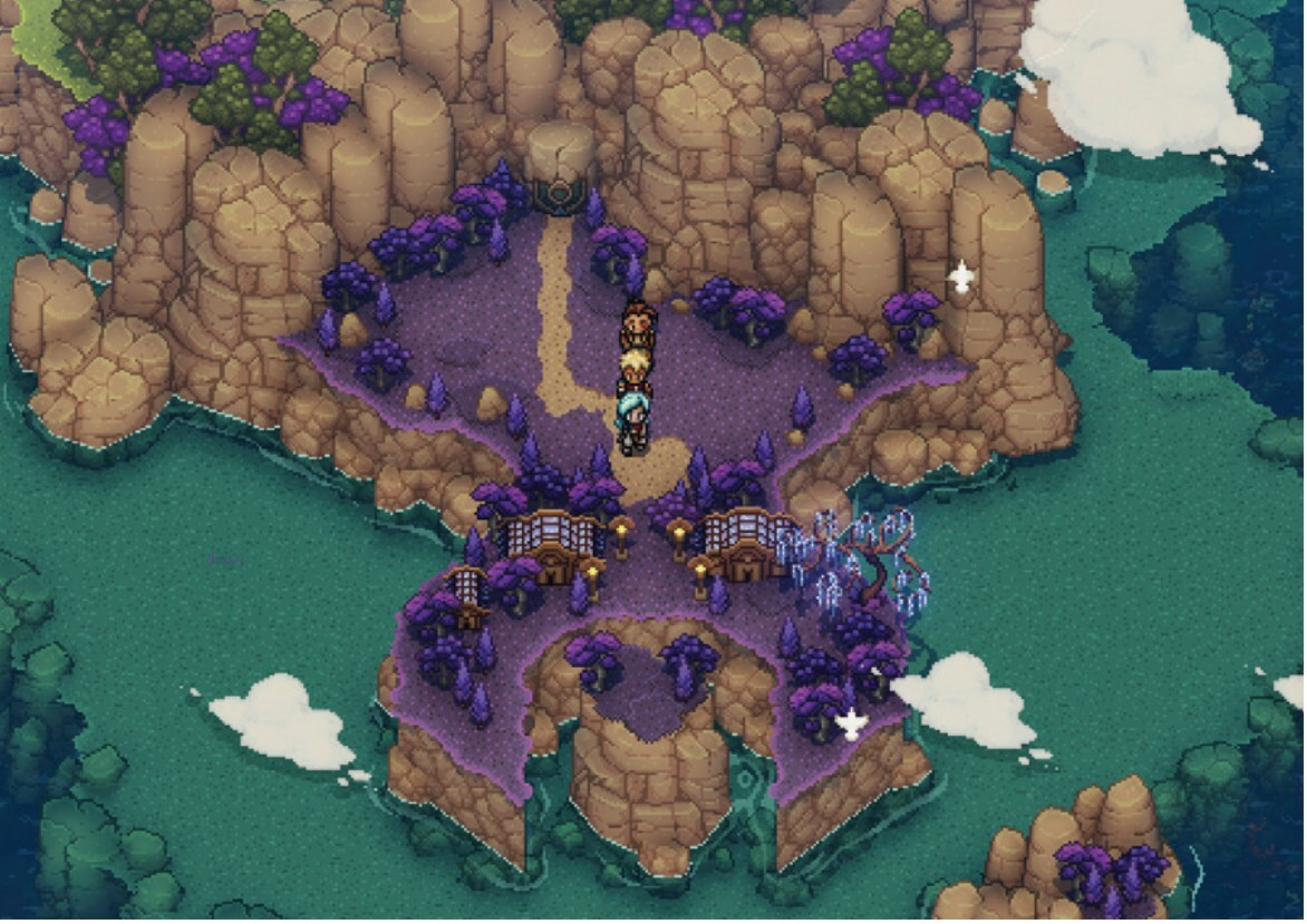
The creators of The Messenger are putting everything into their classic RPG adventure, Sea of Stars

BY
KYLE HILLIARD



When The Messenger was released in 2018, Thierry Boulanger went into its launch with reasonable expectations. He was proud of the game he and the team at Sabotage had made, but he was prepared to consider it a success even if it didn't sell well. "If 100 People bought it, I would have been like, 'Oh my God, we hit three digits. So, for sure, there's at least one person I don't know that bought it,'" Boulanger says. The Messenger sold far more than 100 copies and even took home The Game Awards' Best Debut Indie award alongside many other accolades. With its unique approach to platforming and a fun story twist that allowed it to exist as both an NES and SNES throwback, The Messenger was a hit and quickly allowed Boulanger and Sabotage to pursue its dream project: A large-scale RPG unabashedly inspired by 16-bit greats like Chrono Trigger, Super Mario RPG, and many more. "It's been seven years, and it's still kind of a dream," Boulanger says.

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sabotage Studio **DEVELOPER** Sabotage Studio
RELEASE August 29 **RATING** E10+



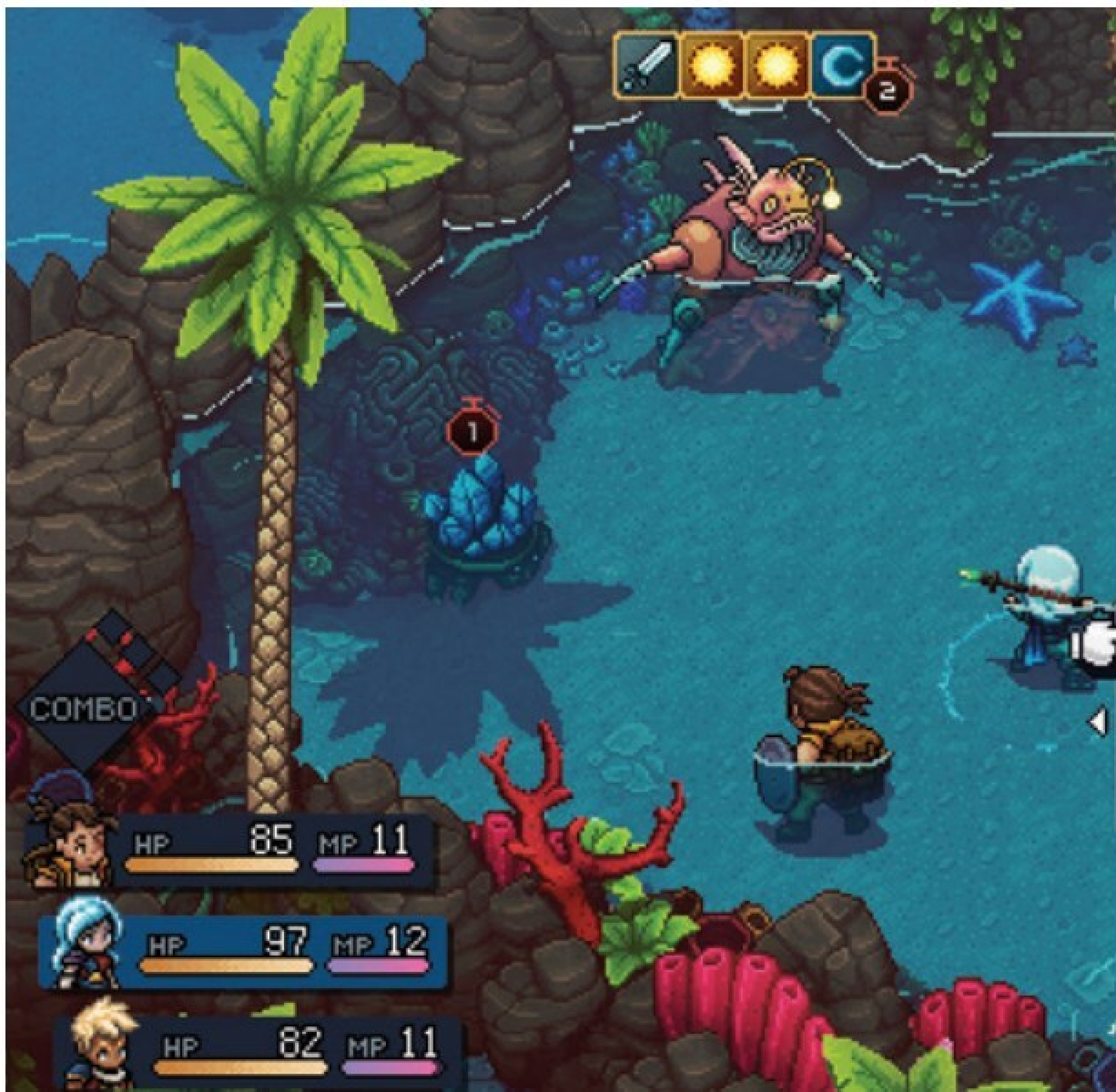
LOOKING TO THE SEA OF STARS

Even before development officially concluded on The Messenger, Sabotage was already thinking about Sea of Stars. Internally, it was seen as the big reward for the potential success of The Messenger – a game the studio still cares about deeply. “There’s more to be told about [The Messenger] – that specific arc. Maybe one day. But it was really like, ‘If this works, then we get to make an RPG together,’” Boulanger says. Making an RPG is a tall order. Production is longer, and there are far more moving parts, but Boulanger wanted to take the time The Messenger’s success afforded and make the game he had been pondering since he was a child.

“The games we make are all born of a fantasy world I’ve had in my mind since elementary school,” Boulanger says. Both The Messenger and Sea of Stars exist in that world he’s been formulating and growing over time, but they take place many years apart. The Messenger takes place on top of a mountain in a post-apocalyptic chapter of the universe, at a point when a gigantic flood has shrouded most of the world in water.

Sea of Stars takes place thousands of years before that flood, when landmasses were more plentiful. The adventure takes place on an Archipelago, with each island named after a curse or peculiarity that affects it. You make your way between these islands as you solve problems and propel the story forward; eventually, you will even have your own boat. “Think of Mass Effect, for example. You can go into character view, talk to your crew, get reminders on what to do next – you know, things like that,” Boulanger says, while also citing games like Lufia and Chrono Cross as examples he and the team looked toward when considering the layout of the world.

“One of those islands,” Boulanger says matter-of-factly, “Would be the one from The Messenger.” But beyond that, he is not ready to share more about what connects the two games either thematically or narratively, save for one final cryptic tease. The Messenger surprised players by beginning as an NES-inspired linear platformer before suddenly changing into a 16-bit, more open, Metroid-inspired platformer. “[Sea of Stars] does have a thing that happens at some point that you don’t expect, while you were hopefully already perfectly happy with your hearty slice of what you already played,” Boulanger says without expanding.



INTRODUCING VALERE AND ZALE

Before Sea of Stars begins properly, a mysterious character named The Archivist, seated in a messy library called the Great Archives, welcomes the player. The Archivist describes themselves as an immortal versed in the ways of alchemy. They have been cataloging the events of countless timelines over thousands of years to assemble the correct one and believe they have made a mistake. The Archivist says, "Should the Mists of Times allow a slight alteration, I believe the ray of hope that was once offered may yet bloom."

Before beginning the story, players are instructed to pick their protagonist. Valere is a blue-haired woman blessed with the power of the moon, while Zale is a red-haired man who controls the power of the sun. "The main thing is – it was always a dual protagonists story in my mind, for decades, before we actually got down to making it," Boulanger says.

When making your selection, there is text onscreen explaining that it ultimately does not matter who you pick, and you can change at any time. The trajectory of the story is not affected by this first decision. You don't even see the design of the characters right away. "Even on the first screen of the game, you see the starry sky that says there's two protagonists," Boulanger says, "And then you get the moon and sun icons that appear for which one you want to pick. We don't even show the characters yet. We want you to pick between sun and moon first, and then even that order is randomized."

At this point the world is still generally a mystery, thought it's clear you've entered a fantasy setting where magic exists and the population is under the protection of Solstice Warriors – which is the role you fill. After picking your character, you are introduced to them later in life as they prepare to go off on their first official Solstice Warriors adventure before jumping back in time to see them as children and meet their friend, Garl. The trio gets into trouble exploring where they shouldn't have, which leads to Garl losing an eye against a slug creature with a unicorn horn.

Despite his injury, Garl maintains his impressive optimism and is heartbroken when Valere and Zale's teacher, Headmaster Moraine, takes this troublemaking as a sign that it is time for the two to begin their training. This decision means years of separation from Garl. "It's hard to explain how I feel about this guy," Boulanger says of Garl, with his grand knowledge of the full journey. As a player who has only spent a few hours with Garl, he seems like an absolute sweetheart who will support Valere and Zale no matter what. "He's the ultimate golden retriever. He's just this endlessly wholesome character presence," Boulanger says. "He's the support character. He's the best friend of the two main protagonists, and he's always kind of doing a thing you shouldn't do. And then he apologizes, but everyone just laughs and it's always okay." He's also a great cook.

Despite separating from their friend, Valere and Zale begin training with the help of the prior generation of Solstice Warriors, Erlina and Brugraves.

2
1
ATTACK
SKILLS
COMBO
ITEMS

Story At Your Discretion

Meeting The Archivist is a strange way to kick off the story, and it's even stranger when you consider The Archivist and the Great Archives are all products of lore established outside of Sea of Stars. On the Sea of Stars Kickstarter page (which raised $1.6 million), you can read about The Archivist's journey from talented alchemist, to immortal being, to student of forbidden alchemy that led to the creation of The Flashmancer, to timeline destroyer, to eventual obsessive librarian who is trying to repair all they have broken. It's all important storytelling for those who want to be absorbed into Sea of Stars' world, but it's also intentionally optional, which extends to all facets of the game's storytelling.

"I know that some people, they just care more about the lore and the world building and some don't. And so you don't want to force people to sit through exposure if they just want to, to move on, right?" Boulanger says. This is an early example of story that you can bypass, or track down on your own later, but there are more in-game examples throughout. Teaks is an archeologist character you meet early who does not join your party in the typical way. Rather, she appears whenever you rest and will offer to tell you stories about the world. Some are just meant to color the land with more history, others are directly related to important quests, but the player can engage with them at their leisure. Maybe you don't want to hear Teaks' story about the mysterious Vespertine ship until you meet the pirate crew that desperately wants to capture the ghost ship and use it for their own gain. Maybe you don't need any of those details and you just want to soak in the atmosphere and engage in combat. That choice is up to the player.

Years pass by in a flash as you participate in combat and magic tutorials, watch the two grow older (and change character models), eavesdrop on Erlina and Brugraves as they privately wish Valere and Zale had the opportunity to live normal lives, and learn about Sea of Stars' ultimate threat: Dwellers born of the The Fleshmancer that, if left unchecked, will transform into World Eaters. Headmaster Moraine obsessively tracks these Dwellers and trains Solstice Warriors to fight them during eclipses, which is the only time these villainous creatures expose their weaknesses. It is the duty of the Solstice Warriors to combat these Dwellers and Valere and Zale understand and embrace their role. All of this is in service of showing the player the ropes, exposing the mechanics of the world, and setting you up to finally, truly begin your adventure.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

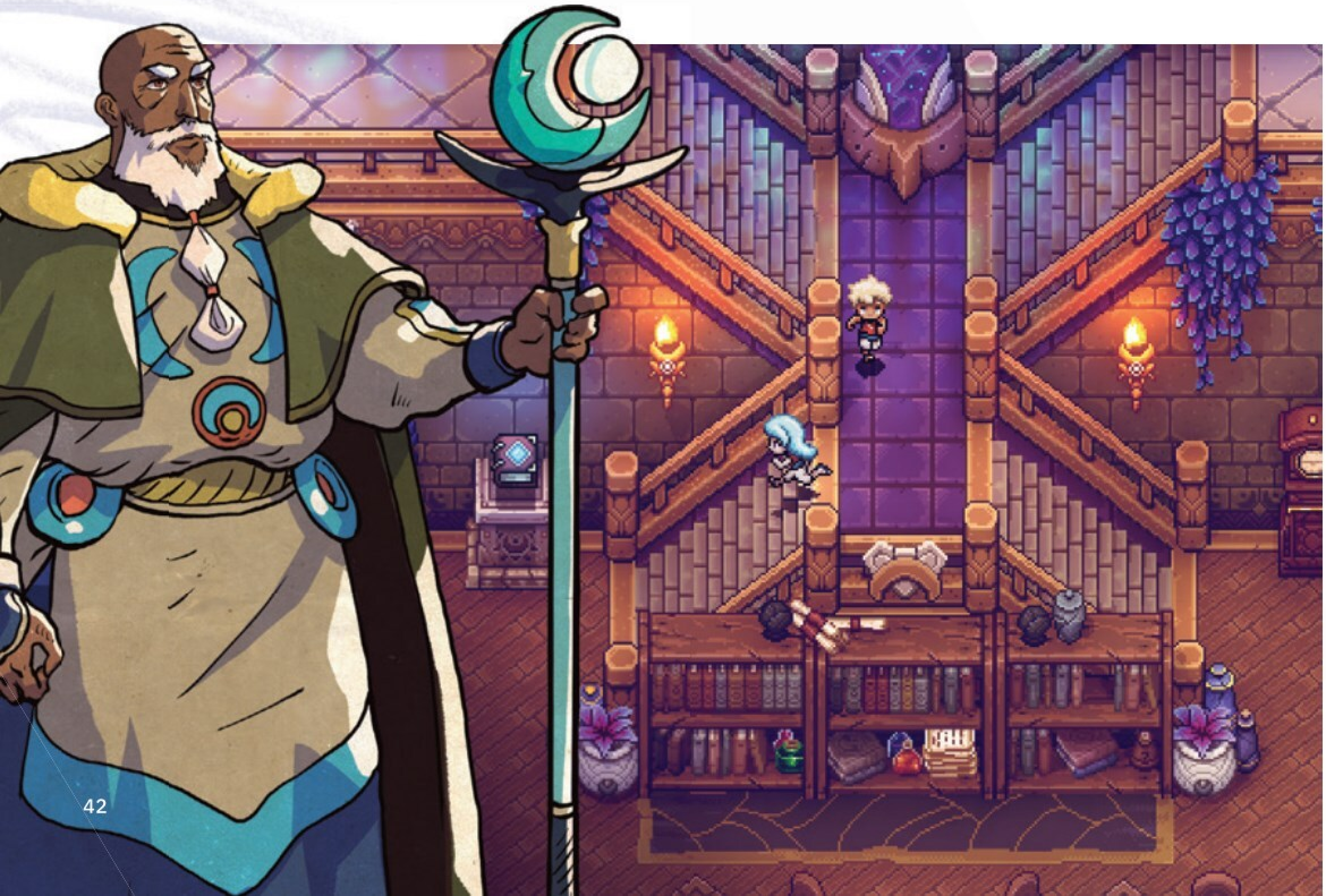
After years of training, your first task is fully accepting the role of Solstice Warrior with the permission of Elder Mist, a magical floating head made of clouds. Making your way through Elder Mist's trials also showcases Sea of Stars' puzzle-solving and impressive maneuverability. For all the praise lavished on the games that inspired Sea of Stars, it is fair to define them as linear and straightforward. They prioritize story and combat over the act of getting from point A to B, which is why I was so surprised how much Valere and Zale can climb and leap across the environment. Sea of Stars is not a platformer, but Valere and Zale can easily climb ledges, jump over gaps, and even fall from high heights to platforms below that house hidden chests or ingredients for cooking.

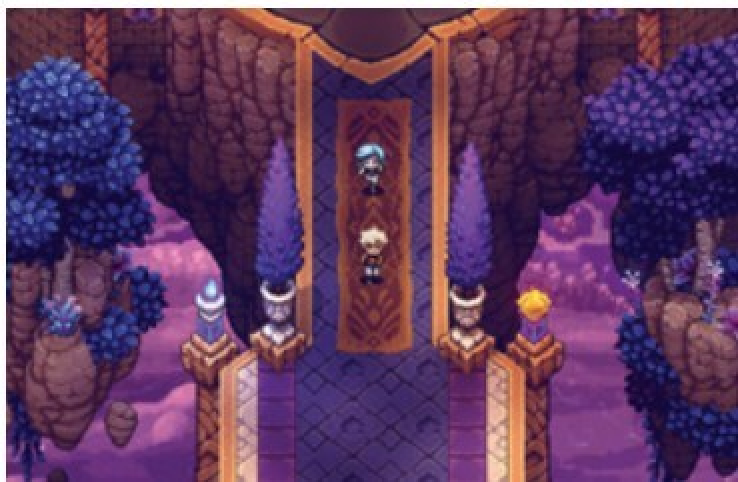
"That was one of the three pillars that we're going to work with for the game," Boulanger says, "That level of traversal, where you're completely free from the grid." The layout of any location will still look familiar to anyone who has played a 16-bit RPG with an isometric view, but the options for movement are much more diverse. Boulanger also wanted to make sure you could jump on roofs, which he considers a game changer. "You've probably noticed the swimming is just in and out directly, too. There's no entry point or exit point. We wanted everything to be seamless, breaking free of the grid as much as possible."

After flipping switches to solve puzzles and fighting enemies in the clouds, Elder Mist finally decides we are ready to take him on as the final boss of the training dungeon. After defeating him, he reveals a new visually significant power. In specific locations, the Solstice Warriors can change the time of day in an impressive display that affects every aspect of the

Making Meals

Alongside collecting typical RPG items like money, improved weapons and armor, and key items, the environment is also full of ingredients that can be turned into food at any campfire. You find recipes as you explore, and cooking is as simple as holding down a button on a recipe (as long as you have the ingredients). This mechanic is not unique to Sea of Stars – plenty of games do this – but the art accompanying each recipe sets the cooking experience apart. For example, if you want to make a roast beef sandwich to restore 60 HP in battle, you see a few pieces of art as the recipe comes together. One shows the meat being prepared, another shows the bread being baked, while another shows vegetables being chopped before displaying the final product. The art is fantastic and a worthy reward for tracking down ingredients and recipes.

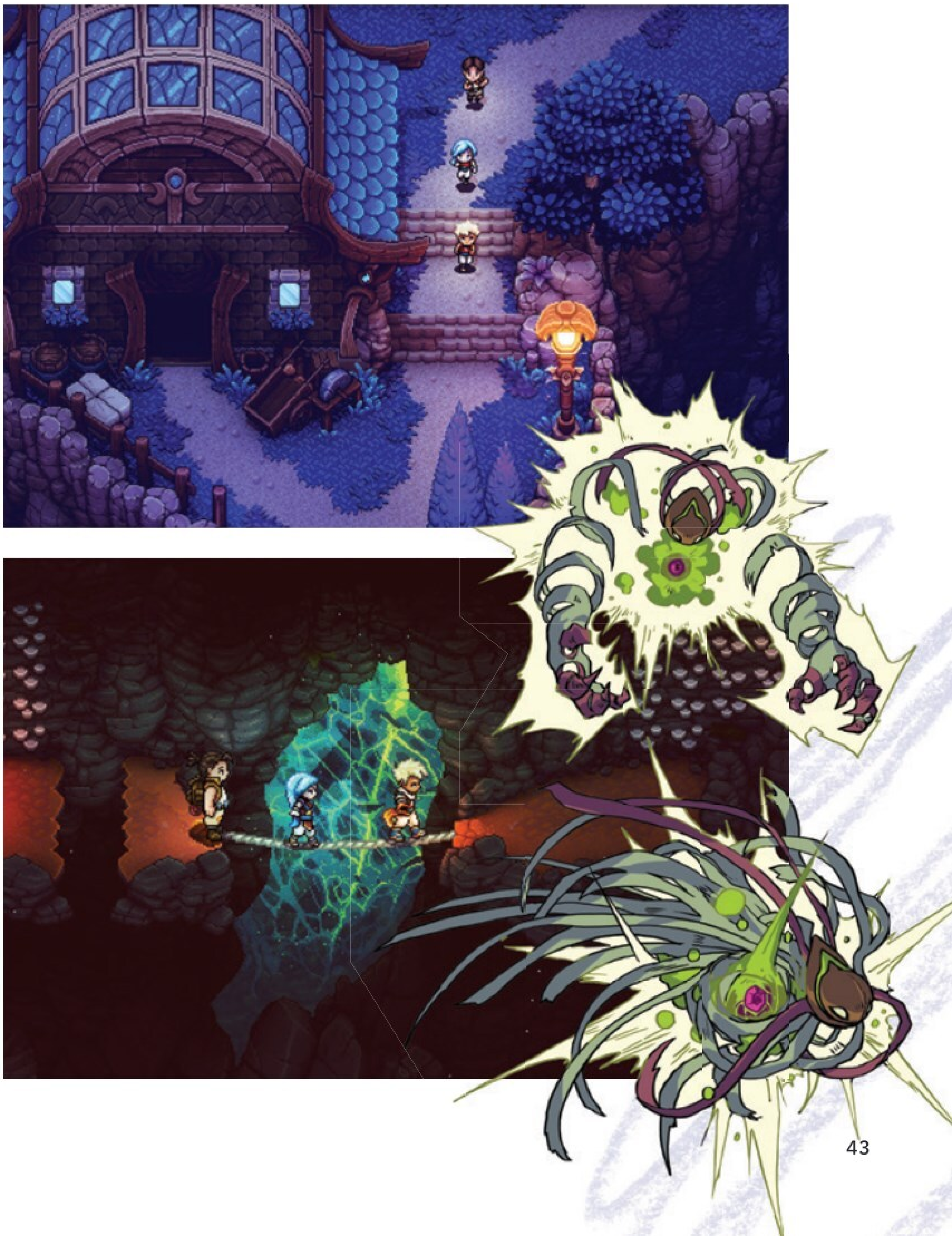


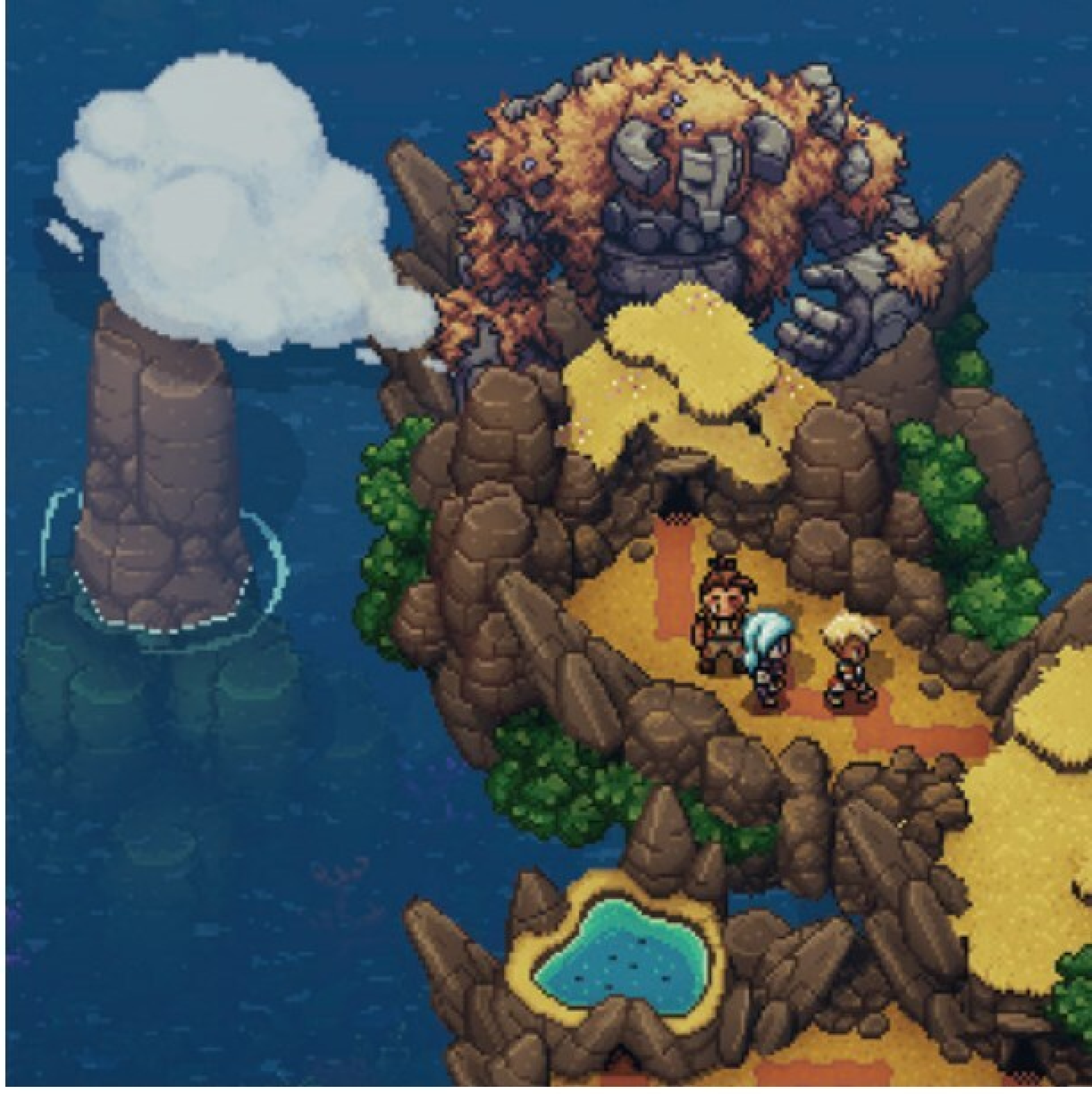


environment. The lighting in the sky changes as day transitions to night, and shadows move at different angles and lengths. It's a beautiful and stark reminder that even though Sea of Stars is meant to look like a Super Nintendo game, it plays with modern visual technology to deploy tricks that would have never been possible on the hardware.

I want to know more about how they pulled off this incredible feat. How much of the game is secretly made of 3D models? How does the, as Boulanger has referred to it a few times in our discussion, dynamic lighting engine work? But much like our conversation about the story implications of The Messenger in Sea of Stars, he is suddenly tight-lipped. "At the moment, we're letting the magic just be there because a lot of people are asking how we did it," Boulanger says. He promises Sabotage will share more details about how it works in the future, but for now, it remains an intriguing mystery.

I don't know how it works, and its most eye-catching implementation is the changing from day to night, but the system is apparent in every aspect of the game. Sea of Stars is a 2D game, but certain magical attacks explode with light and send shadows across the landscape, and walking past flickering lamps will cast jumpy shadows from your character as you walk by. The dynamic lighting engine manages to be subtle in quiet moments, but explosively apparent in others. It is an impressive element that sets it apart from comparable games.





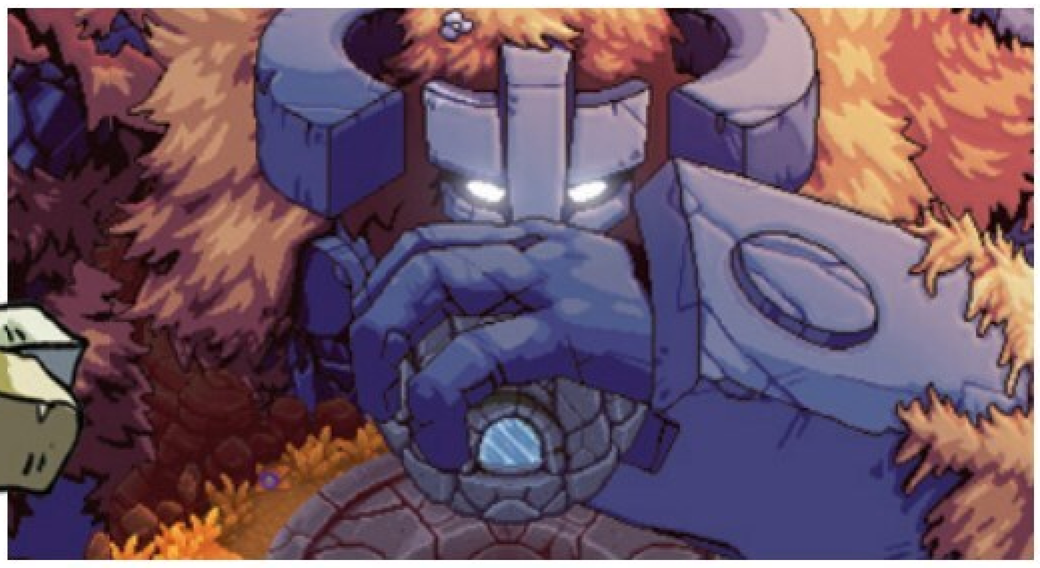
INTO THE UNKNOWN

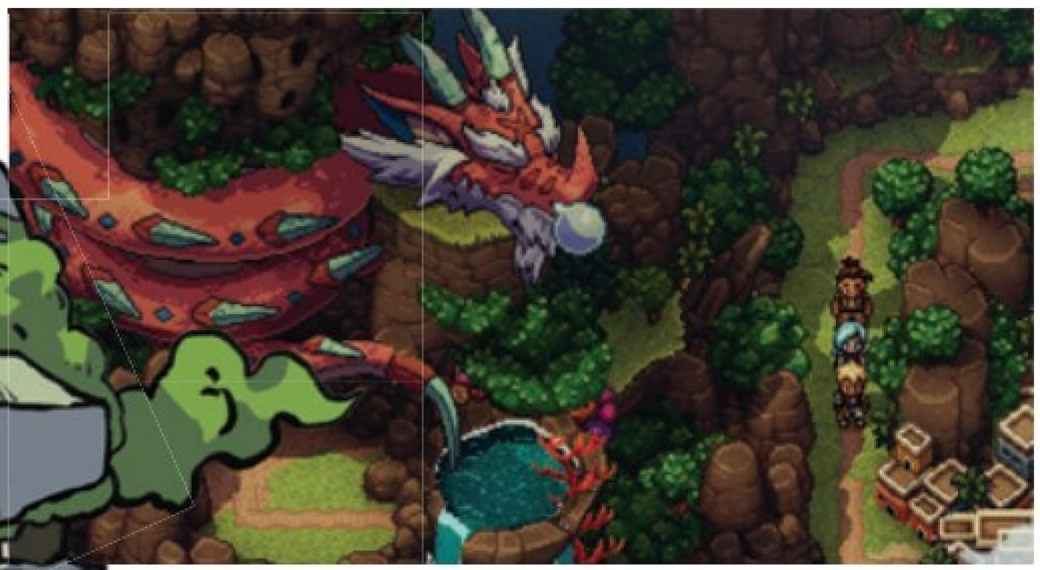
Defeating the Elder Mist and acquiring the ability to change the time of day gives Valere and Zale the tools they need to start their Solstice Warrior mission. The two also finally reunite with their friend Garl who has been doing his own training in their absence and has become an accomplished cook. The Elder Mist, surprisingly, encourages Garl to join the two despite his lack of magic and says to himself maybe he can bring "it" back, but sends them on their way before offering any additional context.

At the behest of their teacher, Headmaster Moraine, the two must travel to a Dweller on Wraith Island who will soon be exposed by an eclipse making them vulnerable to attack. The journey's first step involves meeting what appears to be a gigantic, sleeping stone golem. With the Elder Mist's direction, the golem suddenly comes to life, scoops up your party in a bowl and flings you off into the distance. The transportation method is both thrilling and terrifying, and perhaps most importantly, it just looks cool.

Bruno Moraes is Sea of Stars' lead animator, and the golem creature was one of the first moments where he recognized he was working on something special and ambitious. Moraes has a history of working in pixel art on smaller characters, and was initially intimidated when meeting the golem. "I remember looking at it and being like, 'I'm not sure I can do this. I'm not sure anyone can,'" Moraes says. "These characters are so big, it would sometimes crash our editing software, because it's not meant to deal with such big characters. But we found a way around, and I think it's looking real nice."

While still reeling from the interaction with the golem and its powerful arm, the trio lands in the distance unscathed and immediately meets an even larger creature, The Sleeper. "It's such a big character," Moraes says. "It was very intimidating to work on." The Sleeper is a gigantic, dragon-like snake that is wrapped around an entire mountain – the mountain to which the golem threw you. On the world map, you can see it snoring in restful slumber, but you quickly learn that the music created by the wind ripping through the mountain's tunnels, which keeps The Sleeper at rest, is in danger thanks to an outcast from the nearby village of mole people named Malkomud. It's Garl who immediately suggests the crew pause their current journey to help The Sleeper maintain its namesake.





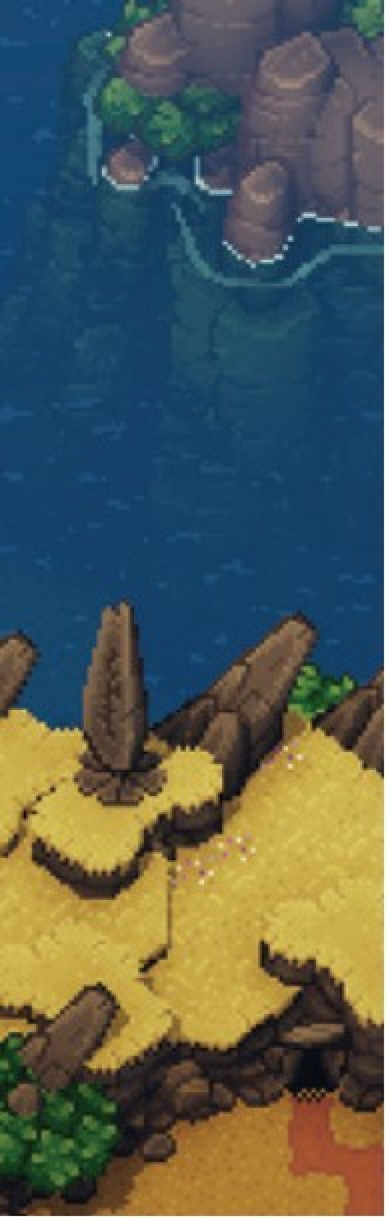
FIGHTING WITH CELESTIAL POWER

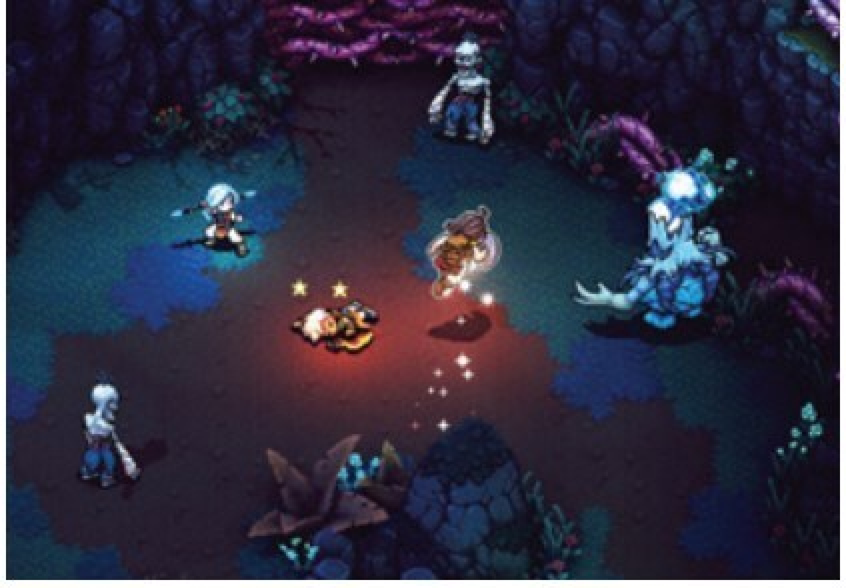
Tracking down Malkomud involves entering the mountain and fully engaging with Sea of Stars' combat system. Monsters must be defeated and blocks must be moved using the recently discovered Mistral Bracelet. Valere and Zale are able to shoot blasts of wind from their fingertips with this bracelet.

Battles are not random in Sea of Stars. Occasionally, characters may surprise you by jumping from the shadows, but the player initiates the vast majority of engagements. You see the enemy, you approach them, the fight begins. Much like Sea of Stars' main inspiration, Chrono Trigger, you do not enter a separate combat screen. Battles begin precisely where you're standing.

"The main thing for me with combat was, obviously, for it to be active, right? Never stale," Boulanger says. From the beginning, he was insistent that numbers always remain small to make them more manageable, and to make sure players don't lean on single, powerful attacks for every encounter. Boulanger didn't want players, "just casting Meteor all the time while chugging Ether."

Every character has magic or special attacks in the case of characters who do not use magic. Normal attacks regenerate your magic and special ability





meter, so you are encouraged to use those abilities in combat. Executing a standard attack almost feels like a waste if you're not using it to regenerate your special meter, which is by design. "If you keep wanting to use the same thing, it's just not going to be an option anymore," Boulanger says "It's going to kind of force you to try something else."

Boulanger wants the player never to be stuck in a loop and uses cover shooter mechanics as a point of comparison. If you're hiding behind a wall and get too comfortable, a grenade will likely appear at some point and force you out of hiding. Even if it doesn't make narrative sense or is a little transparent in its mechanical intention, it serves an important purpose. "It forces you to move and that gives you a new angle on combat and then everything feels fresh," Boulanger says.

Another way the game does this is a series of images or Locks, as Boulanger calls them, that appear over enemy heads. They show the sequence of attacks necessary from the player to prevent the enemy from making a big, difficult-to-avoid attack. Instead of just hitting that annoying ant enemy with a series of regular attacks until it dies, for example, you will want to hit it with a few moon attacks and some sun attacks because if you don't, it will call in two more ants to join the fight.

The Locks system is also a way of encouraging you to use every character. Eventually, your party will consist of six fighters, but only three can ever fight in a battle at a time. You will have your favorites, but sometimes the Locks can only be broken by that one character you don't often use. There is no turn penalty for calling in a different character in the middle of a fight. "There's going to be a time where the best option is to use the character that you've never used," Boulanger says, "And then maybe that character grows on you, because now this guy felt powerful to use and you got to see that special move that you haven't tried yet."

Making Music With Chrono Trigger's Composer

The majority of Sea of Stars' soundtrack is in the hands of the talented Eric W. Brown, who also composed the soundtrack for The Messenger, but Sea of Stars has a secret weapon with the participation of Yasunori Mitsuda. Mitsuda has worked on dozens of games since the mid-'90s, but he is best known for his work on Chrono Trigger. Sabotage managed to get in touch with Mitsuda, who was impressed with Sea of Stars and decided to compose about 10 tracks for the game. "There's no words to describe this. Like, it's ... we literally got the guy," Brown says of the partnership.

Boulanger, similarly starstruck by Mitsuda, described an early interaction with him where he asked the team through a translator if they wanted him to channel his style of composition from Chrono Trigger. "It's the one time in this career that we got to answer an e-mail with just, 'Yes!'," Boulanger says.

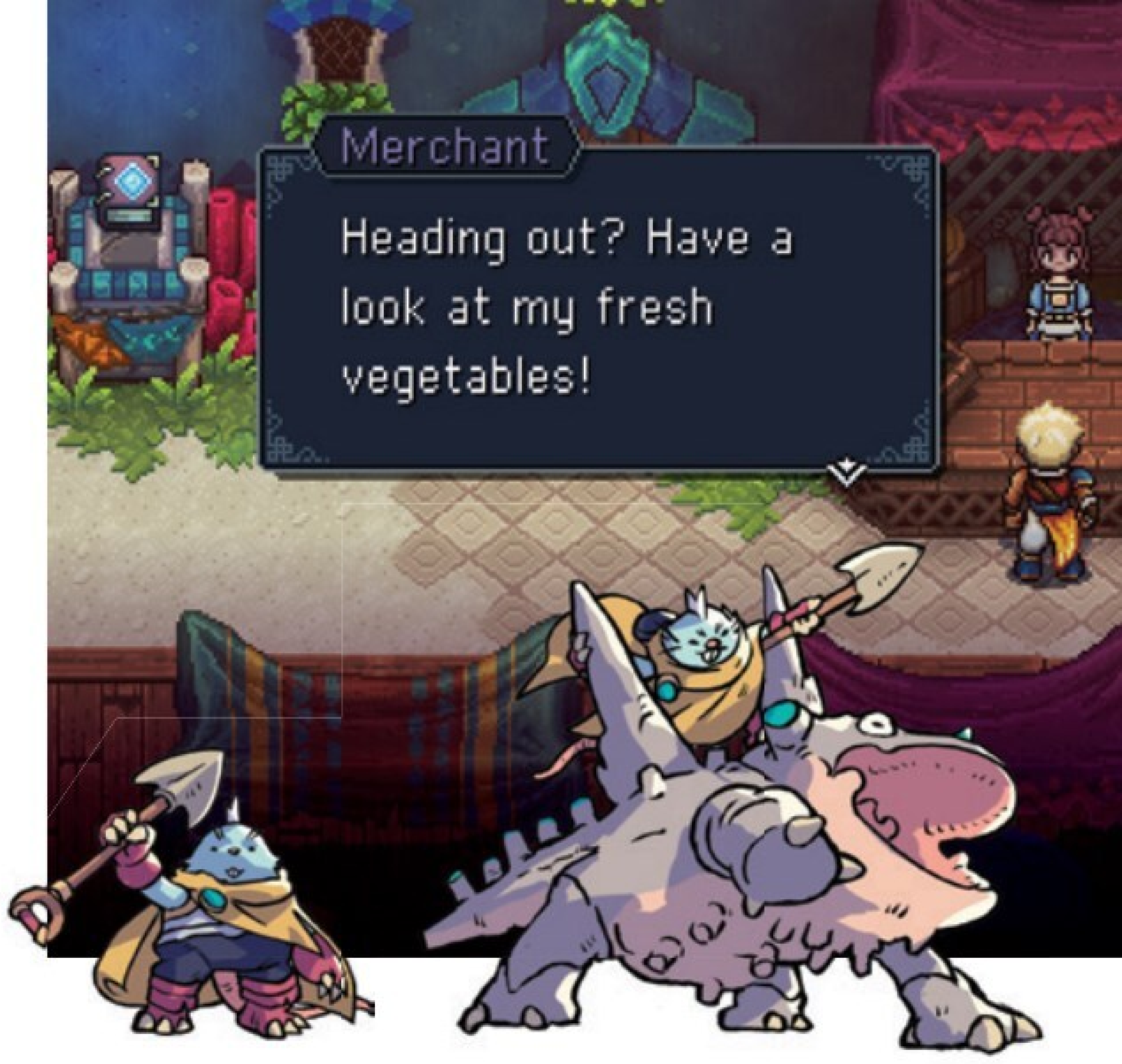
And Mitsuda was happy to do it. Speaking with Mitsuda over e-mail, he wrote, "It felt incredibly nostalgic. I worked while thinking about how I took the trouble in the past to use these kinds of techniques, which are no longer necessary these days. The joy of putting together music one sound at a time is one of those things that is usually only experienced with the game consoles of that time." For his Sea of Stars composition, Mitsuda tried to emulate the SNES's "echo" sound as he describes it, and even jumped through technical hoops to make it sound of a different era. "While keeping a taste of the feel of that time, but also using modern technology, I tried creating the music for Sea of Stars as if it were coming from a slightly upgraded SNES. Usually, synthesizer audio can be used as is, but this time I deliberately resampled the audio in 32 kHz and applied an effect with the same settings as the SNES 'echo'. The sound is more gorgeous than that of the past, but I think you'll somehow be able to feel that SNES feeling."

Despite the technological advancements of musical composition over the years, Mitsuda says his writing process actually hasn't changed much. "I try to fully understand the game's world and atmosphere, reread the scenario many times over and imagine the kind of music that it needs," Mitsuda writes, "When necessary, I make a relationship chart of the characters. While doing so, the music that the game is asking for starts naturally coming to mind."

Hitting enemies with standard attacks also releases a collection of boosts that can be picked up and used by any fighter. Pulling the right trigger on anyone's turn pulls these boosts toward the character and augments their abilities to make them a little stronger. You can leave them on the battlefield and save them up or use them to help you tackle Locks as needed. You can also build up a combo over the course of a battle to use cooperative abilities.

Timed button presses are the final and most important element of combat, both offensively and defensively. Boulanger is very straightforward about what game inspired its implementation in Sea of Stars: Super Mario RPG. "I'll just say it's really the timing of the hits, the timing of the blocks – how that makes turn-based combat just constantly engaging. The fact that it makes you pay attention," Boulanger says.

The combat features even more depth than what is outlined here. Elements like enemy placement are also a factor, and you can limit damage received with well-timed defensive button pressing. The important part, though, during my time with the game is I found it consistently captivating without getting overly complicated.



Heading out? Have a look at my fresh vegetables!

ROCKIE THE LIZARD

After a series of fights and puzzle-solving, we finally track down Malkomud and fight him and his gigantic pet lizard, Rockie. Rockie is one of my favorite enemies I've encountered, as his design and animation are both a display of power and puppy-like excitement. He eats my party members and spits them out for damage.

Moraes is similarly a fan of Rockie and explains the process of taking him from concept to in-game enemy. "I usually start with the head and then focus on other parts of the design like facial features and everything," Moraes says.

They also have to do size tests to make sure the design fits against the main cast. From there, the character has a list of animations that must be completed from different angles. Taking those animations and integrating them into the game takes time. "A few weeks later, you see it integrated in game and with VFX and sound effects, too, and it feels like it came to life," Moraes says. "That is something that I never tire of. I'm not used to that feeling."

It turns out Malkomud is basically a kid with magic powers who has been ostracized by the people of his village, who don't understand his abilities. Garl, the sympathetic labrador he is, calms Malkomud and convinces him he has friends in us even if he doesn't in his village. Malkomud doesn't join the party, but I suspect we will meet him and Rockie again.

Want to Play Right Now?

Sabotage afforded us the opportunity to play through the game's opening eight hours. We saw a huge portion of the game and even experienced story moments we have chosen not to detail to avoid spoiling the story. If you want to experience a small portion of what we were able to play, a truncated, playable game demo is available now. It will allow you to experiment with the combat, see the impressive dynamic lighting engine in action, meet the main cast and the pirates mentioned in the story, and take on at least one major boss. Sabotage has hinted it also hid some bonuses in the demo for thorough players.

You're Solstice Warriors!

THE PIRATE'S LIFE

With The Sleeper's rest officially undisturbed, Valere, Zale, and Garl make their way to the town of Brisk to charter passage to Wraith Island where the Dweller rests. A group of pirates needing adventurers to help them track down a valuable haunted coin challenge the party to an arm-wrestling competition and promises them passage as long as they help them first.

From there, an ever-complicating series of events takes place at an impressive pace. After losing the arm-wrestling competition thanks to a questionable magical shirt that makes the wearer strong, Valere, Zale, and Garl make their way to an abandoned wizard's lab to fight a ghost-like entity made of fabric. With the coin acquired, the pirates take them to Wraith Island on their rundown raft, where they all convene at an inn called The First Stage of Grief to wait for the eclipse.

Being the heroes they are, however, they can't sit tight while the Dweller hypnotizes victims to enter the haunted woods. This dilemma sets off a whole other series of escapades. Valere, Zale, and Garl encounter zombies from the colonial ages, a soul stone, a mysterious ninja, a ferryman to the dead, and a new item that expands the already impressive overworld navigation. They swim through a flooded cemetery where giant rib cages of expired animals lie just visible under the muck of the surface – and all of that happens before Headmaster Moraine, Erlina, and Brugraves finally show up to assist with the Dweller.

So much happens that leads to many unique encounters, enemies, and puzzles, and that's exactly how Boulanger wants it to be. Boulanger wants the player always to be singularly focused on what they're doing and hopes that it does not feel random and references one of the games that did it best. "In Chrono Trigger, if I took the controller from your hands and asked, 'What are you doing right now and why?' You'll say something like, 'Well, there's this evil wizard in the Middle Ages, and this frog has a broken sword that I need to fix, but the stone to fix it stopped existing, so I went back in time to prehistory, and now we have the rock, but they stole our key to get back into the time gates and now we're fighting reptile humanoids who want to take over because we need the key back!" Boulanger says.

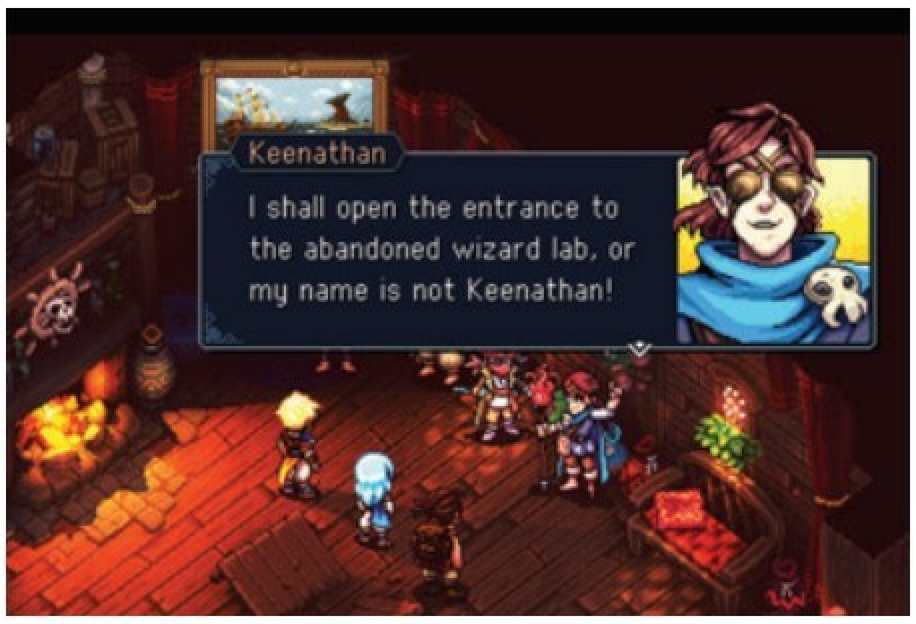
It's a lot to take in, but done well, you always know what you're doing and why, and that's the hope for Sea of Stars. "When a game tells the story, well, you feel those arcs."

OUT TO SEA

I ultimately spent about eight hours with Sea of Stars from the beginning to meeting what I presume to be the first Dweller. Without going into detail, I will say it was there the game truly felt like it was beginning. The actual plot machinations emerge during that fight, and one of the most positive things I can say is I am upset I am not able to keep playing. I had the privilege of taking an extended look at the game's early hours, but now I am stuck waiting months to play more and see what happens next.

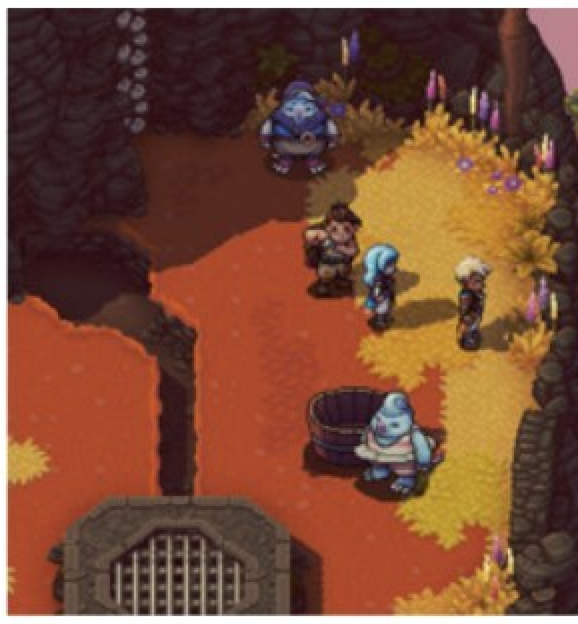
Sea of Stars is not the only game to look at the era of 16-bit RPGs for inspiration, but it is the most fun I've had with the genre in many years. And that's what Boulanger and the team at Sabotage want from Sea of Stars players. They want them to be nostalgic for a beloved era of RPGs, but with a contemporary style and gameplay that makes it as fun as a modern game can be. "None of what we have would run on a Super NES, right?" Boulanger says. "We want it to be as good as our memory of those games." ■

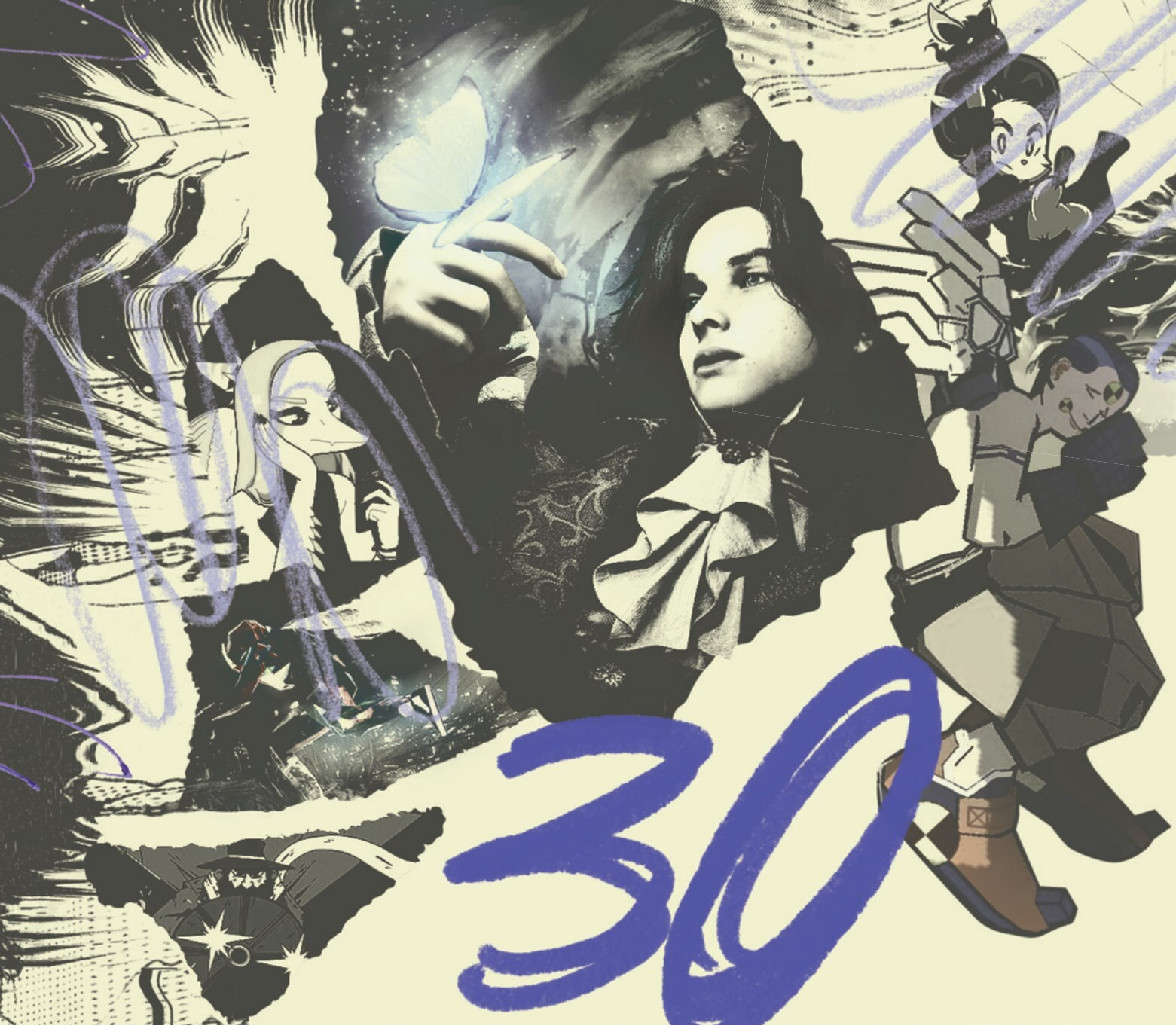
Visit GameInformer.com/TheIndieIssue for the latest on Sea of Stars and more stellar upcoming indies



Keenathan

I shall open the entrance to the abandoned wizard lab, or my name is not Keenathan!





30 INDIES WE CAN'T WAIT to PLAY

Defining an indie game is difficult. You know it when you see it, but indie doesn't always stick to a strict definition. Often, they are games built by small, passionate teams on a limited budget with specific and unique ideas. Sometimes, they have the support of a major publisher, which technically makes them not indie (or "independent") but have that indefinable feeling that makes the "indie" moniker still accurate spiritually, if not literally. Below you will find a collection of indie games, in no particular order, we're excited about and deserving of your attention.

TERRA NIL

Terra Nil is a reverse city builder in which you travel to ruined planets and restore their natural ecosystems with a futuristic suite of renewable technologies. Excavate the wasteland, scrub toxins from the earth, introduce wildlife, or use hydrologic tech. Terra Nil enables you to cultivate serene landscapes instead of tearing them down. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Free Lives **RELEASE** March 28

SKATE STORY

Welcome to Hell. Play as a demon skateboarder "made out of glass and pain" skating through the underworld. The Devil has given you a chance for freedom; you just have to "[s]kate to the Moon and swallow it – and you shall be freed." Skate Story is easily one of the most visually striking games on the horizon, and we cannot wait for its 2023 release. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Sam Eng **RELEASE** 2023

LIES OF P

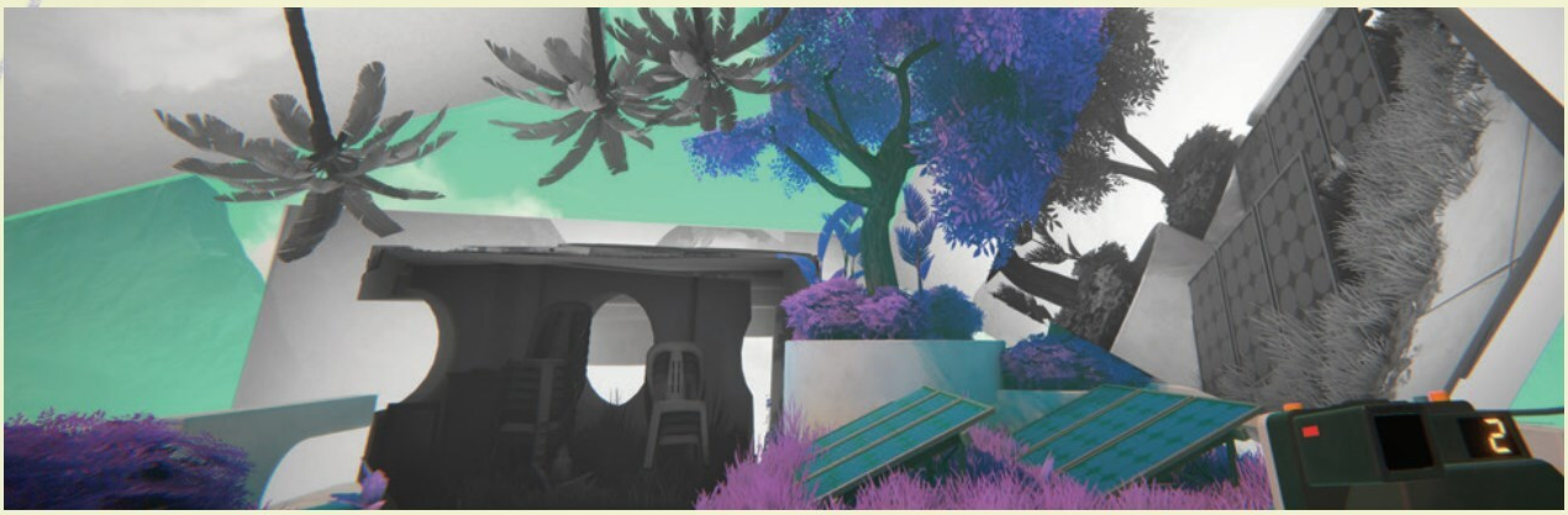
Our noses would grow if we said we weren't excited about this Souls-like spin on *Pinocchio*. As the marionette, you battle through a Belle Époque-era French city with combat resembling Bloodborne. Lies of P even realizes Pinocchio's penchant for lying – sidequests change depending on how truthful you are. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Neowiz **DEVELOPER** Round8 Studio **RELEASE** 2023

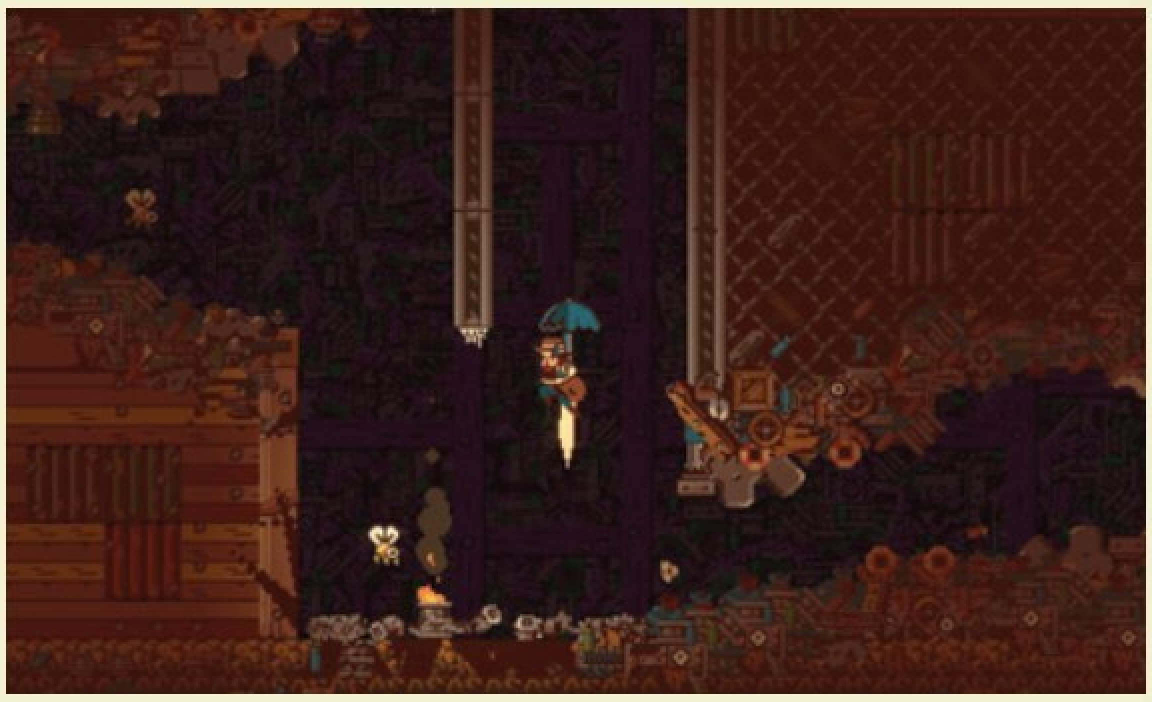
VIEWFINDER

Viewfinder is a first-person adventure about photographing the environment and using metaphysical polaroids to warp your perspective and solve platforming puzzles. The magic lies in capturing a photo, holding the print to eye level, and converting the 2D image into a 3D model to create new paths or solutions. It's all about approaching problems from a different angle. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing
DEVELOPER Sad Owl Studios **RELEASE** TBA



GUNBRELLA

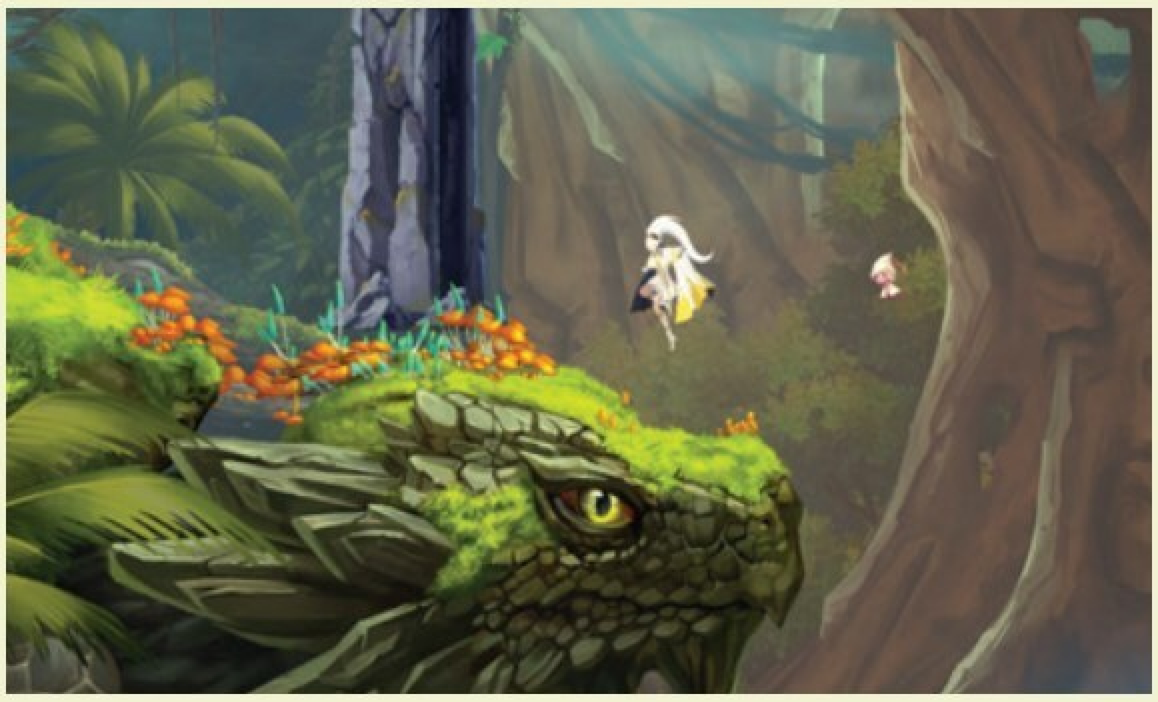


The creators of Gato Roboto, a great Metroid-inspired platformer where you play as a cat, is back with a game in a "noir-punk" universe where you have a gun that is also an umbrella. The gun functions as a weapon but also assists with platforming, allowing the player to float, hook onto ropes, and defend from overhead attacks. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Doinksoft **RELEASE** 2023

AFTERIMAGE

Afterimage is a 2D action-adventure game with stunning hand-drawn visuals. After an apocalyptic event called The Razing nearly decimates humanity, you play as Renee, a girl who's lost her memory, as she defends what's left of humankind. With unlockable weapons, skills, and deep RPG customization, you'll battle goliaths to restore peace to Engardin. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Modus Games **DEVELOPER** Aurogon Shanghai **RELEASE** April 25

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Hollow Knight was not the first indie game inspired by Metroid, but it is one of the best. Its melancholy tone and enjoyable challenge earned it tons of fans, and its sequel has been highly anticipated since its reveal. For part two, you'll play as Hornet, the princess-protector of Hallownest. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Team Cherry **DEVELOPER** Team Cherry **RELEASE** 2023

HYPER LIGHT BREAKER

Although not a direct sequel, Hyper Light Drifter fans should keep an eye on this spiritual follow-up. Hyper Light Breaker shares the same universe, and its vivid colors coat fully 3D environments. Players can enjoy this third-person action game alone or alongside friends in co-op. Hyper Light Breaker enters PC early access later this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Gearbox Publishing
DEVELOPER Heart Machine **RELEASE** 2023

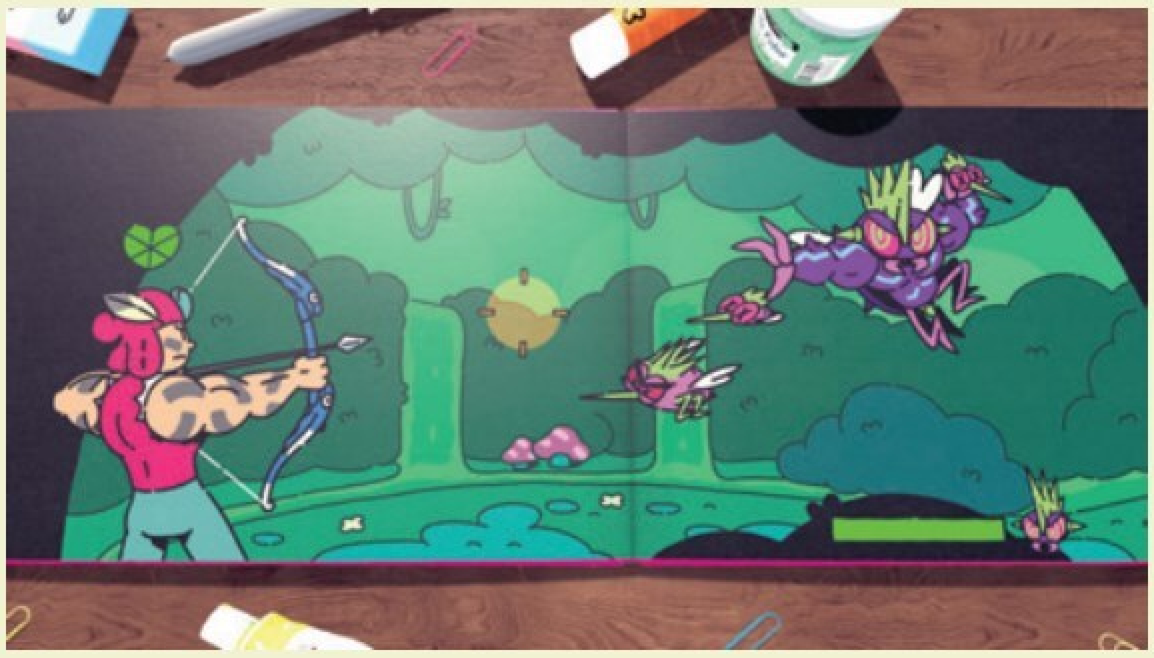
HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER

In Haunted Chocolatier, the next title from Stardew Valley developer ConcernedApe, you're a mysterious chocolate maker in a small town. Travel through a portal in your house to defeat enemies, collect ingredients, and make chocolate. When you're not adventuring, you sell your chocolate, decorate your shop, and grow closer to your neighbors. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA) **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** TBA
DEVELOPER ConcernedApe **RELEASE** TBA

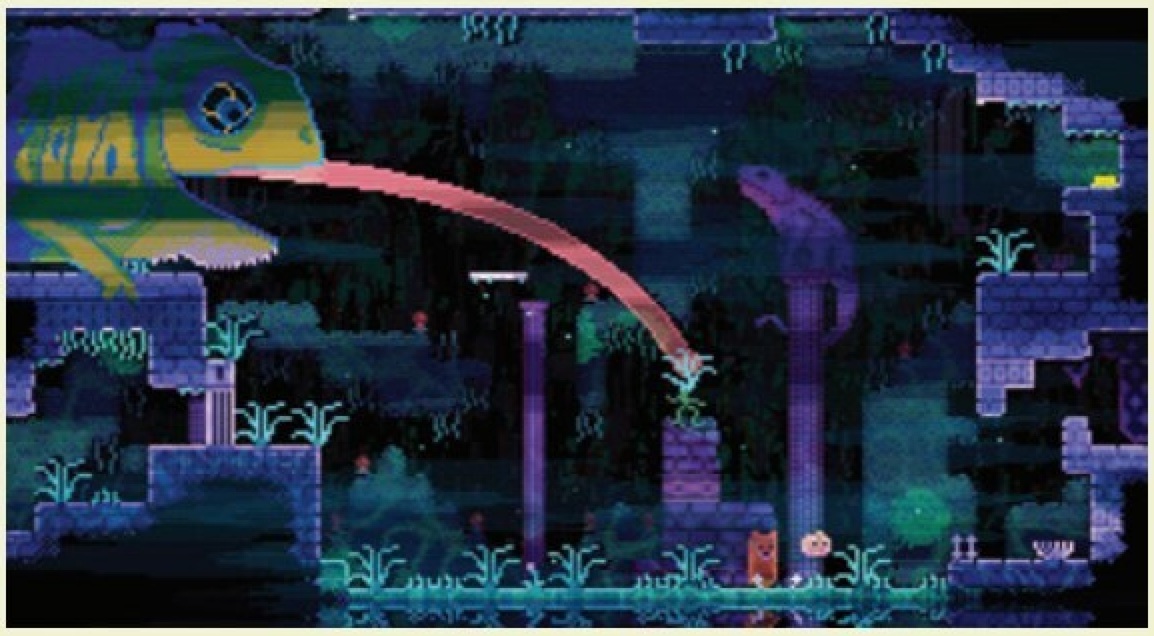
THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

The debut title from All Possible Futures, The Plucky Squire is a game about a picture book starring an adventurer named Jot. The game is played within the book's pages until Jot bursts free and becomes a 3D toy, exploring the bedroom housing his book. It's Pentiment meets *Toy Story*, with the cuteness dialed up to 11. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** All Possible Futures **RELEASE** 2023

ANIMAL WELL



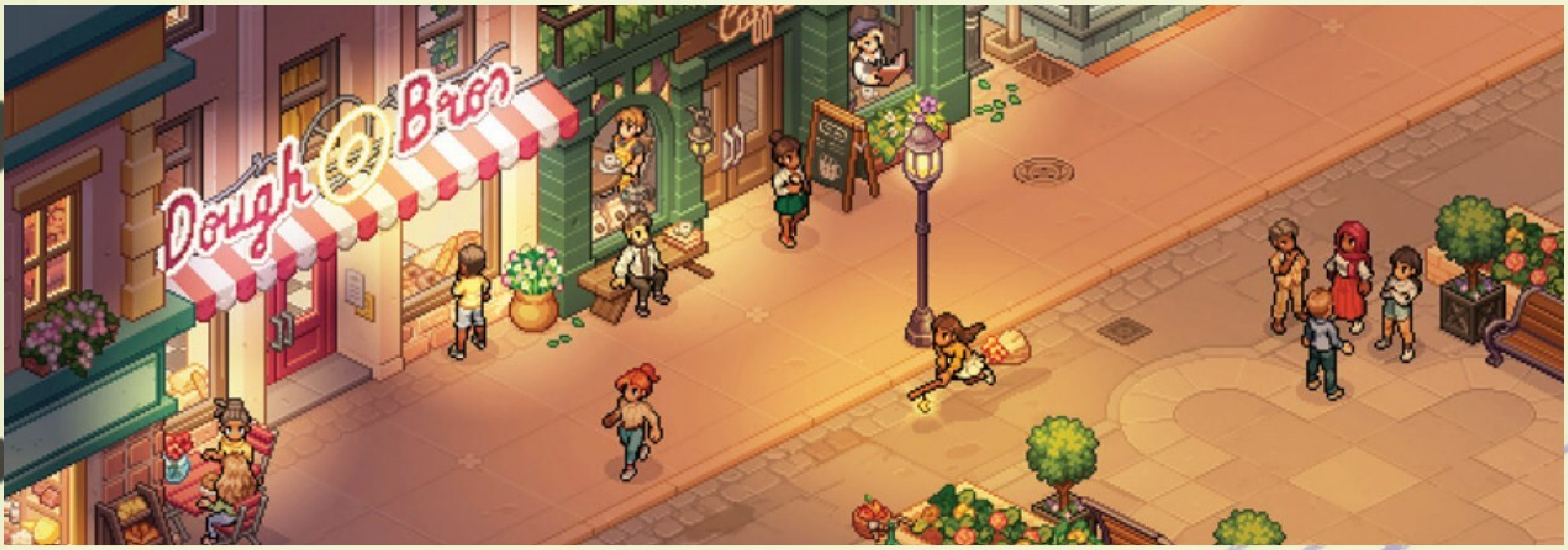
This atmospheric Metroid-inspired puzzle/platformer impressed me the moment I picked up the controller. The retro aesthetic looks familiar at first, but Animal Well takes advantage of modern hardware, creating something more striking than was possible on the consoles it pays homage. Hidden puzzles, fun platforming sequences, and a gorgeous world are just the start of why we're excited about this one. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

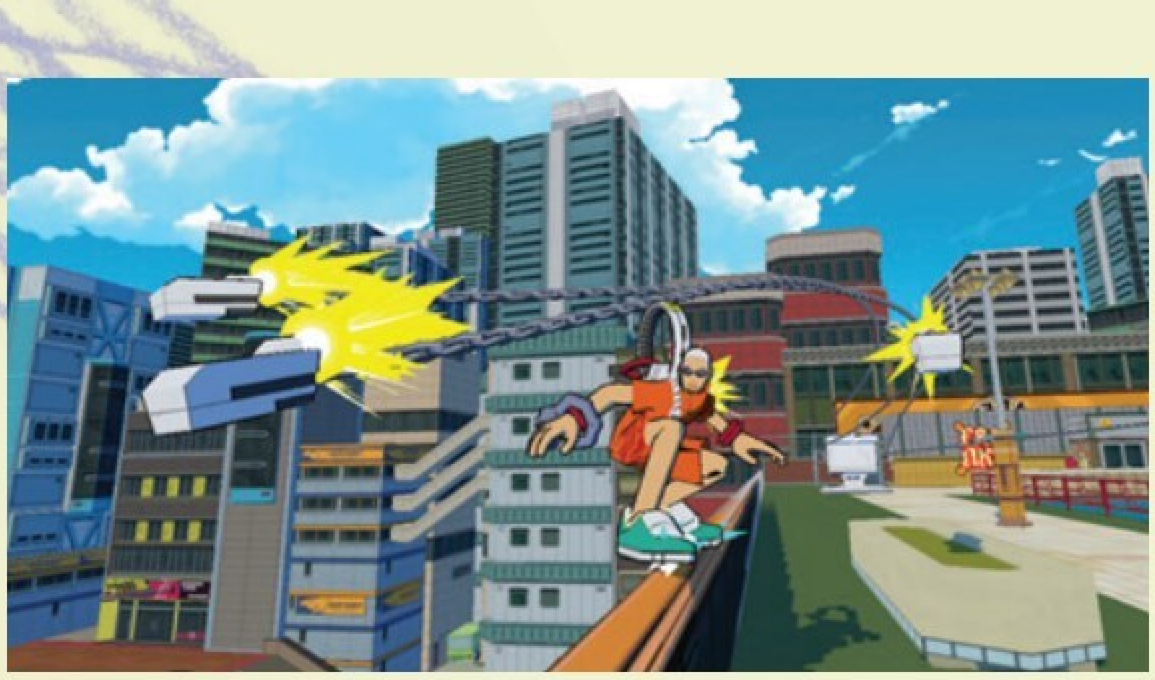
PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle/Platforming **PUBLISHER** Bigmode **DEVELOPER** Shared Memory **RELEASE** TBA

WITCHBROOK

Witchbrook, Chucklefish's magical college simulation, looks excellent. Players must balance classwork with romance as a burgeoning witch, while also partaking in broom races, potion brewing, and mushroom foraging. After graduation, settle in the enchanted town of Mossport as a full-time resident, making a living with your magical skills. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Chucklefish **DEVELOPER** Chucklefish **RELEASE** 2023





BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK

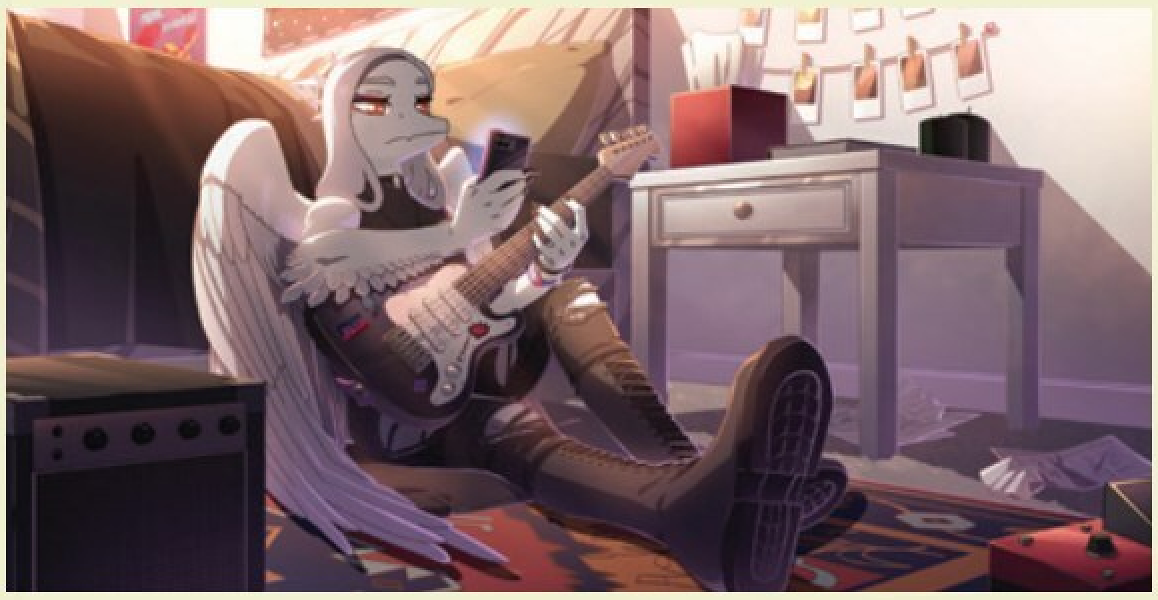
Remember Jet Set Radio? Wish you lived in an alternate timeline where that series continued? Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is your answer. Cel shaded, focused on graffiti and action sports, and full of over-the-top style, Bomb Rush is either shamelessly ripping off Jet Set or wearing its inspiration loudly and proudly on its sleeve. Maybe both. Either way, we can't wait. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM Swtich • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Team Reptile
DEVELOPER Team Reptile **RELEASE** 2023

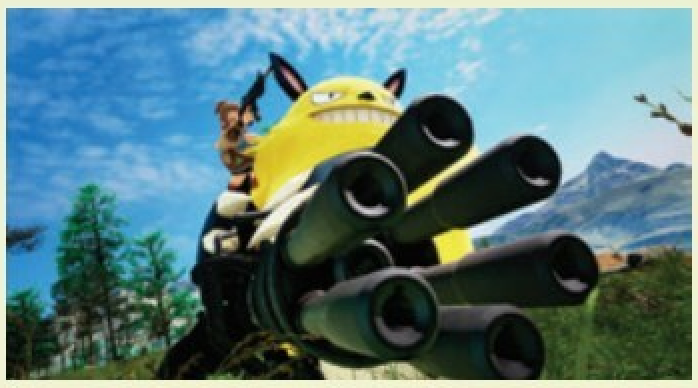
GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

Goodbye Volcano High stars Fang, a student and musician finishing their final year of school alongside fellow anthropomorphic dinosaur buddies. The story centers on themes such as coping with the end of an era and the fear of facing an uncertain future, made more worrisome by the fact that the world is literally about to explode.

BY MARCUS STEWART



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** KO_OP
DEVELOPER KO_OP **RELEASE** June 15



PALWORLD

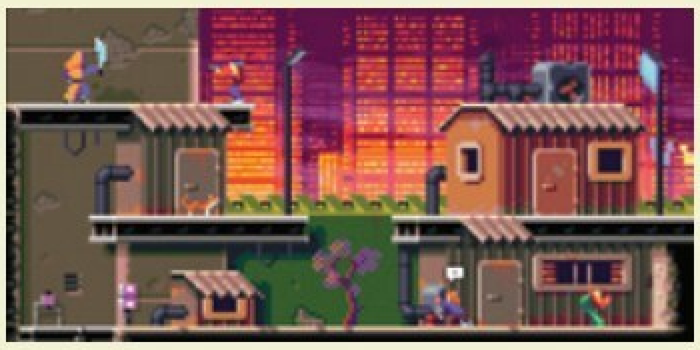
Palworld's elevator pitch of "Pokémon with guns" guarantees it will turn heads. Set in a colorful open world teeming with monsters, you'll be blastin' 'em all using modern assault weapons; even your critters can pack heat. Palworld looks too silly to be real, and we can't wait to see how this idea blossoms when it arrives this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Pocketpair **DEVELOPER** Pocketpair
RELEASE 2023

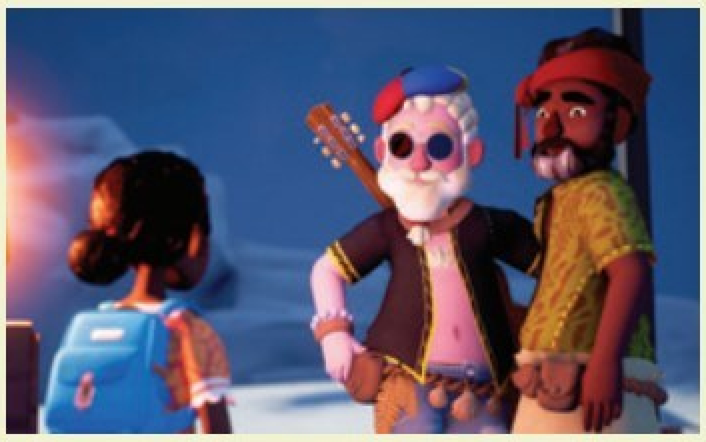
LUNARK

Inspired by classic puzzle platformers like Another World and the original Prince of Persia, Lunark is a rotoscoped adventure game where you help a rebellion fight a totalitarian regime. Jumps must be perfectly measured and timed, and the camera sometimes zooms in for the adventure's impressive, animated pixel-art vignettes. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Wayforward
DEVELOPER Canaru Games **RELEASE** TBA



TCHIA



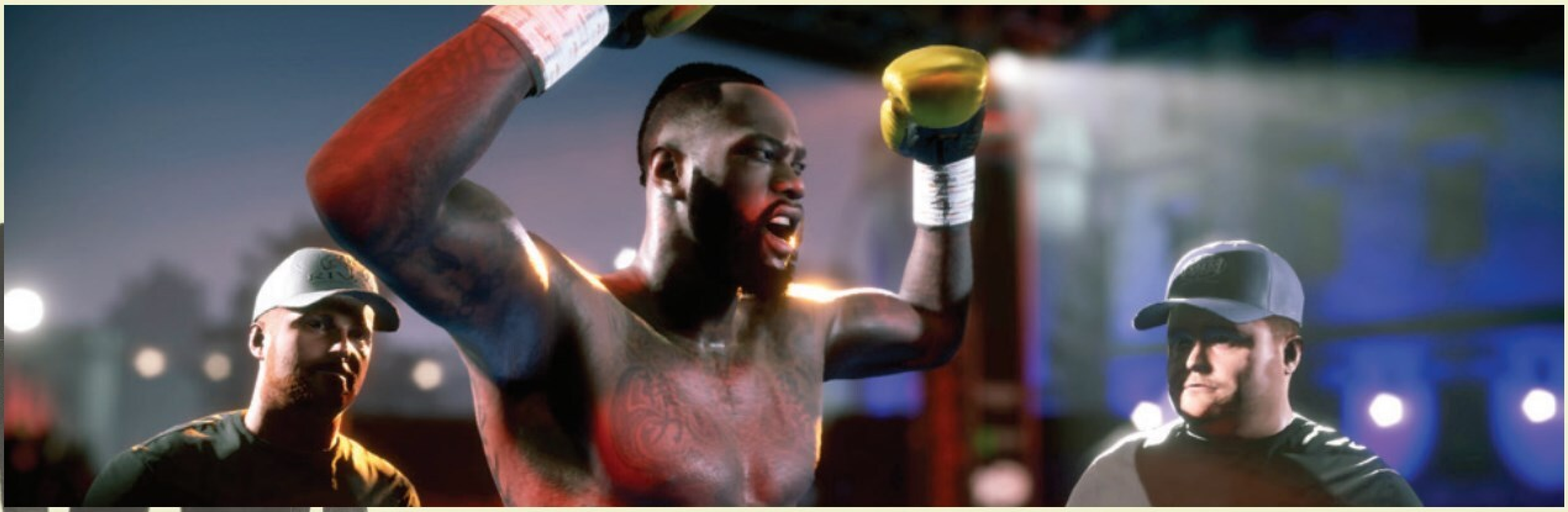
Inspired by open-world games like Breath of the Wild, Tchia tells the story of a girl on a journey to save her father. Along with gliding through the air from any height, Tchia can transform into animals and objects on the island. All the better, this happens on a lush tropical island begging for exploration. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Awaceb
DEVELOPER Awaceb **RELEASE** March 21

UNDISPUTED

With no new Fight Night games from EA since 2011, developer Steel City Interactive has entered the ring. This boxing sim features photorealistic graphics, solid controls, and a large roster, including Muhammad Ali, Canelo Alvarez, Katie Taylor, and more. The final product will include created fighter sharing and a career mode. If you want to try it out, it's available now in Steam Early Access. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting **PUBLISHER** Steel City Interactive
DEVELOPER Steel City Interactive **RELEASE** TBA



HADES II

Supergiant Games' first sequel unfolds sometime after Hades and stars Zagreus' sister, Melinoë. This underworld princess battles her way through new, larger locations to defeat the Titan of Time, aided by the divine forces of Olympus. Like the first game, Hades II will gradually come together in PC early access before its full launch. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Supergiant Games
DEVELOPER Supergiant Games **RELEASE** TBA

EL PASO, ELSEWHERE

An underrepresented genre in video games is "What if we just made Max Payne?" Enter El Paso, Elsewhere, a throwback to the bygone era of third-person shooters where you slow time and dodge around like you're in a John Woo movie. Fight werewolves and vampires through a mysterious, shifting hotel. And most importantly, do it real slow. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Strange Scaffold
DEVELOPER Strange Scaffold **RELEASE** Fall 2023

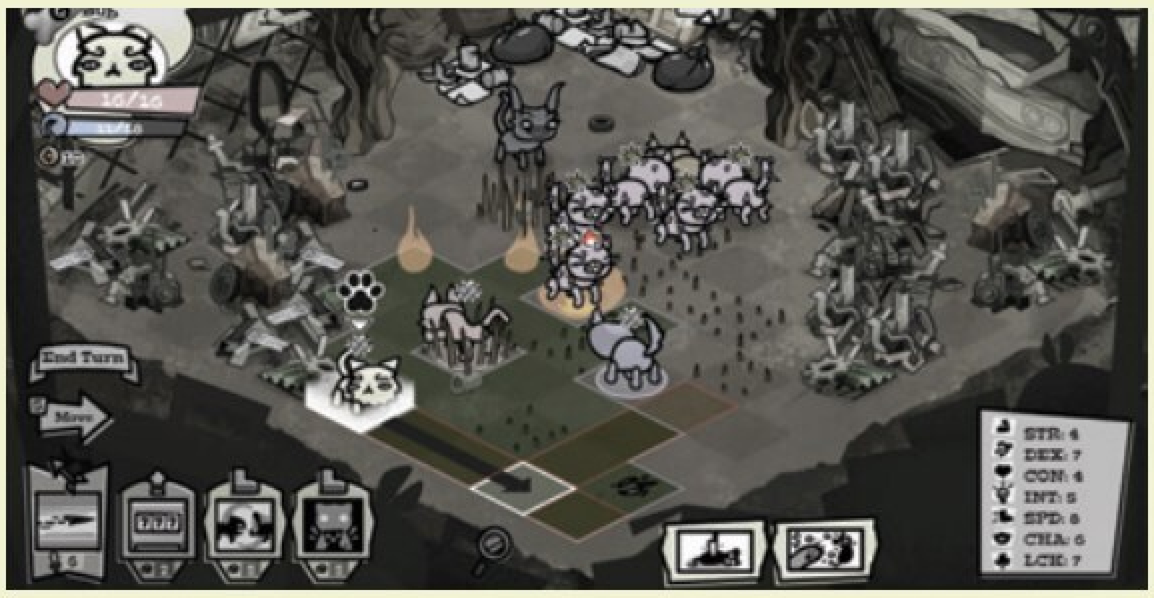
PEPPER GRINDER

In Pepper Grinder, you carry a gigantic drill almost as big as you to rip your way through the ground at high speeds. You can also place the drill inside a minigun to blow enemies out of the way. It's a fast-paced platformer letting you explore a new world by grinding your way through the underground. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Ahr Ech **RELEASE** 2023

MEWGENICS

The creator of The Binding of Isaac and Super Meat Boy is back with a project he started work on more than a decade ago. Edmund McMillen describes Mewgenics as a combination of Pokémon, Animal Crossing, Final Fantasy Tactics, and Dungeons & Dragons. With that blend promising hundreds of hours of gameplay, we can't wait to get our hands on this tactical cat-based roguelike draft sim. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Edmund McMillen, Tyler Glaiel
DEVELOPER Edmund McMillen, Tyler Glaiel **RELEASE** 2024

SONS OF THE FOREST

Following its successful predecessor, The Forest, Sons of the Forest is an open-world survival horror simulator. Hunt wildlife during the warm months, cook food, build shelters and fortifications, scavenge or ration supplies to survive the bitter winter – all while facing cannibals and other mutated horrors. Fight off hunger and thirst, alone or with friends. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (8-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Newnight **DEVELOPER** Endnight Games
RELEASE February 23 (Early Access)

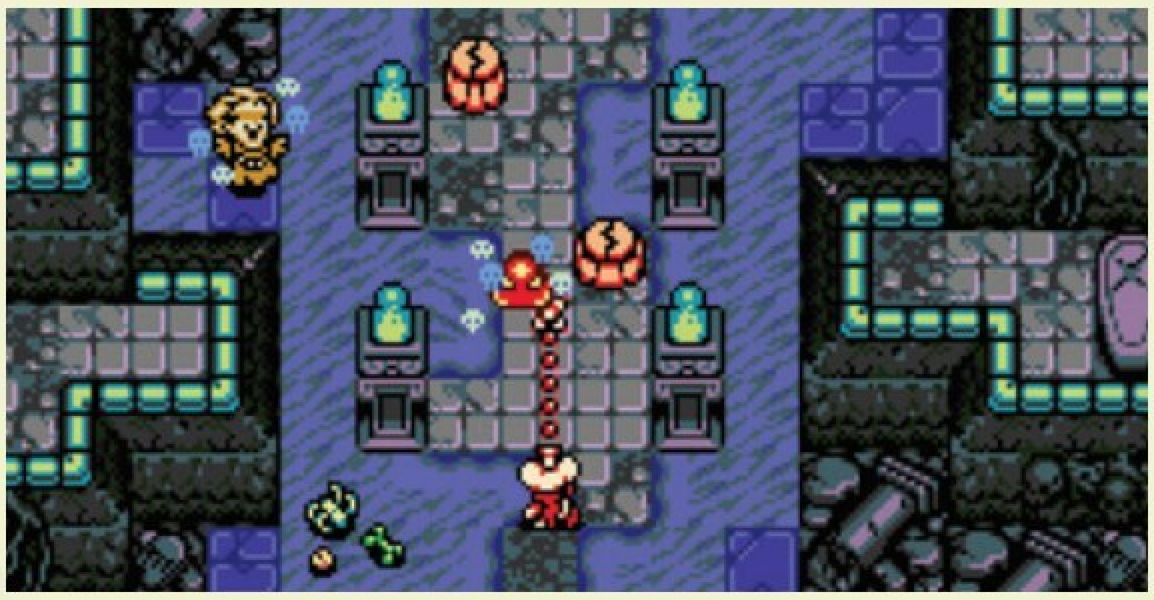
LUNA ABYSS

In Luna Abyss, you are a prisoner tasked with exploring a hellscape on a distant moon to find forgotten technology with the aid of an artificial intelligence prison guard named Aylin. While engaging in fast-paced "bullet-hell combat," you will also encounter cosmic horrors as you struggle to maintain your sanity while uncovering the moon's mysteries. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bonsai Collective
DEVELOPER Bonsai Collective **RELEASE** TBA

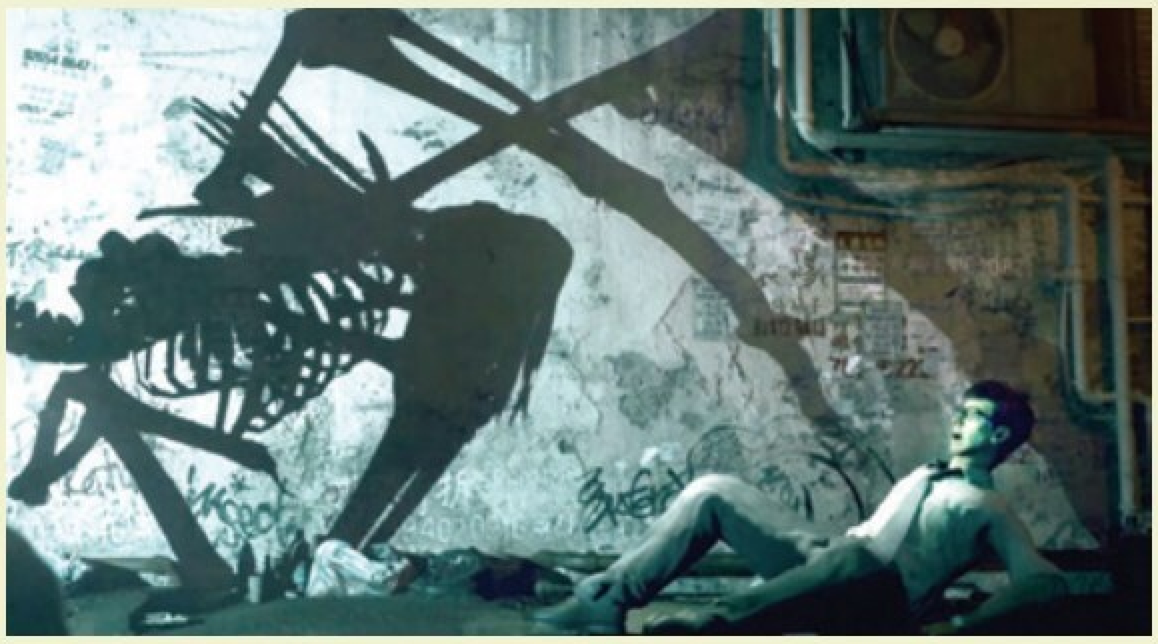
MINA THE HOLLOWER

The creator of Shovel Knight is launching a new franchise with this 8-bit throwback to Game Boy Color-style games, albeit with the mechanics and action you'd expect from a modern release. Control Mina as she digs and whips her way through a bevy of foes while exploring a vast world of secrets and Gothic storytelling. The retro vibe is strong with this one. **BY MATT MILLER**



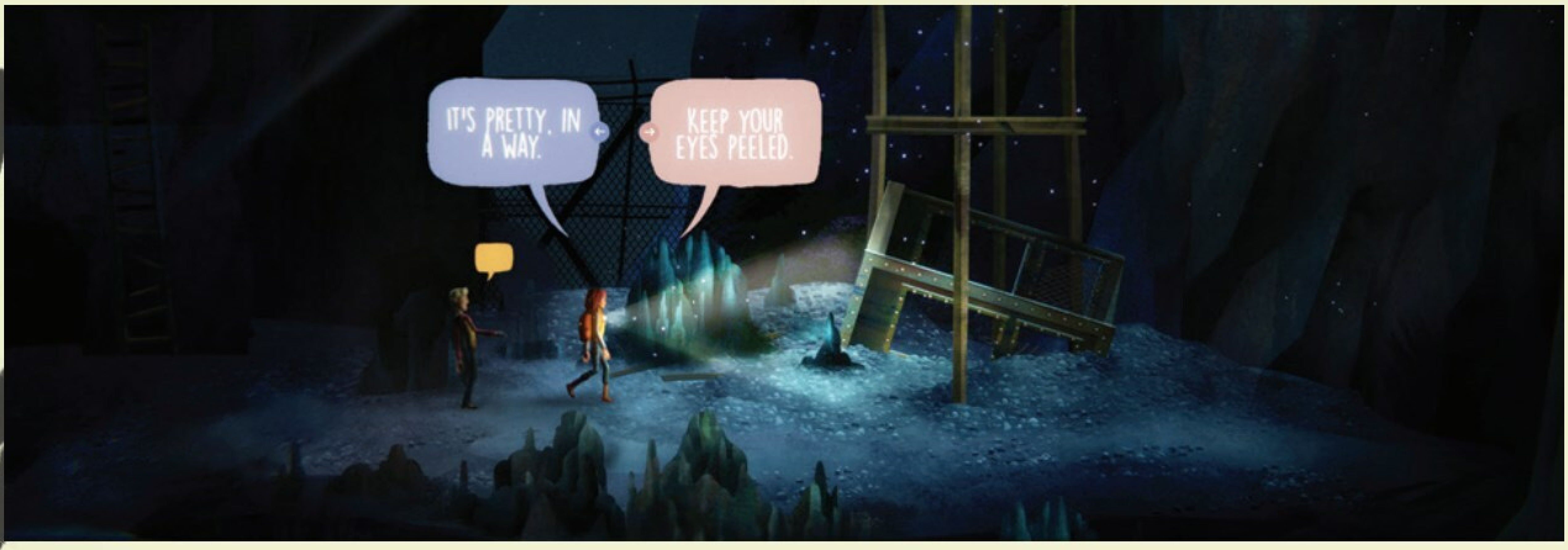
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Yacht Club Games
DEVELOPER Yacht Club Games **RELEASE** TBA

SLITTERHEAD



When it was said that Hong Kong director Fruit Chan, famous in the west for directing *Dumplings*, a movie about eating fetuses, inspired Slitterhead, you should've known the game was shaping into something unlike anything else. That it's also created by the minds behind Silent Hill, Gravity Rush, Siren, and The Last Guardian – well, what more could you want from this horror-adjacent action game? **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bokeh Game Studio
DEVELOPER Bokeh Game Studio **RELEASE** TBA



OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

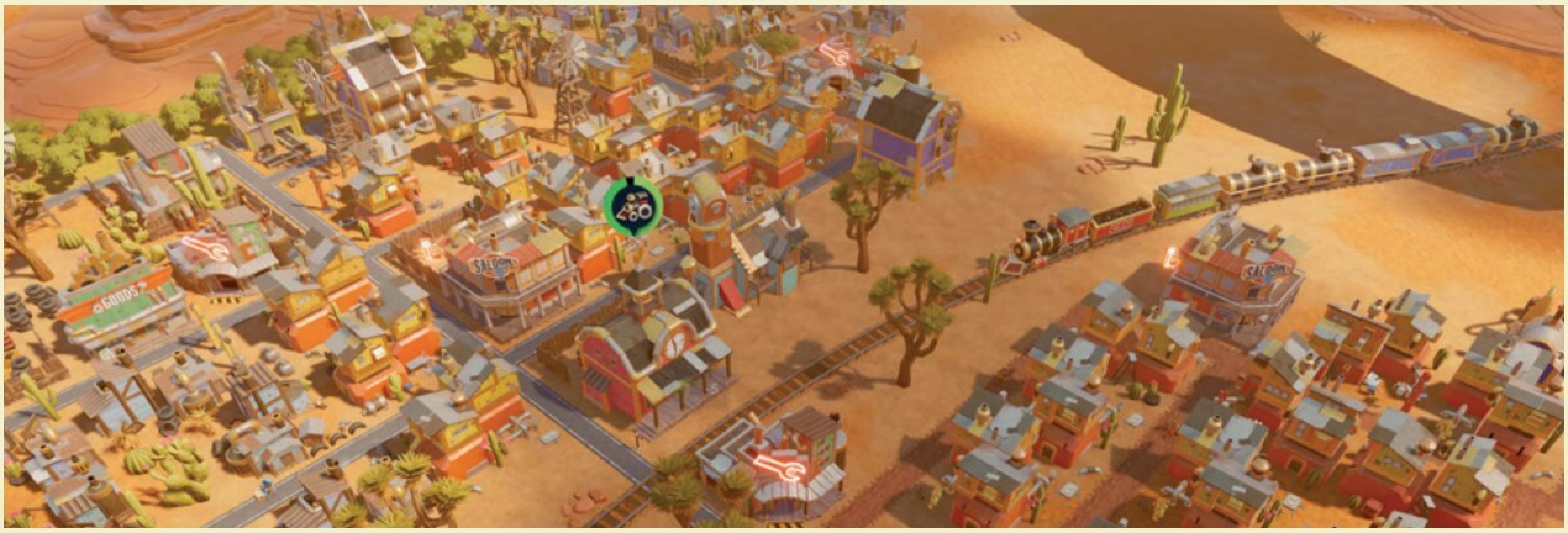
A direct sequel to the original Oxenfree, Lost Signals features the return of the series' natural dialogue, spooky visuals, and choice-driven narrative. Five years after the events of the first game, you play a new character named Riley as she travels to her hometown of Camena to investigate radio transmissions and tangle with supernatural forces. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Netflix
DEVELOPER Night School Studio **RELEASE** 2023

STEAMWORLD BUILD

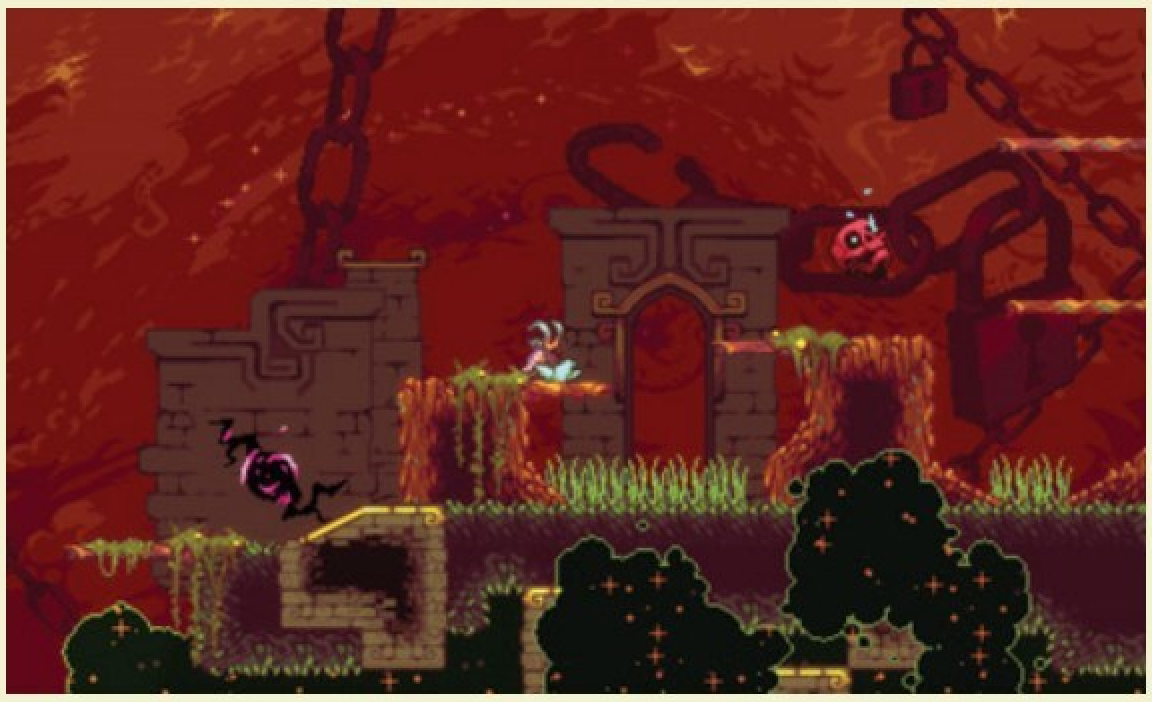
The planet is dying, and for civilization to survive, it needs to escape. As if that news wasn't already bad enough, the key to escaping is buried deep in an underground mine. In SteamWorld Build, you must construct, develop, and manage a mining town to drill deeper to uncover the technology needed to flee the planet, all while surviving the creepy creatures within the mines. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing **DEVELOPER** Thunderful Development **RELEASE** TBA



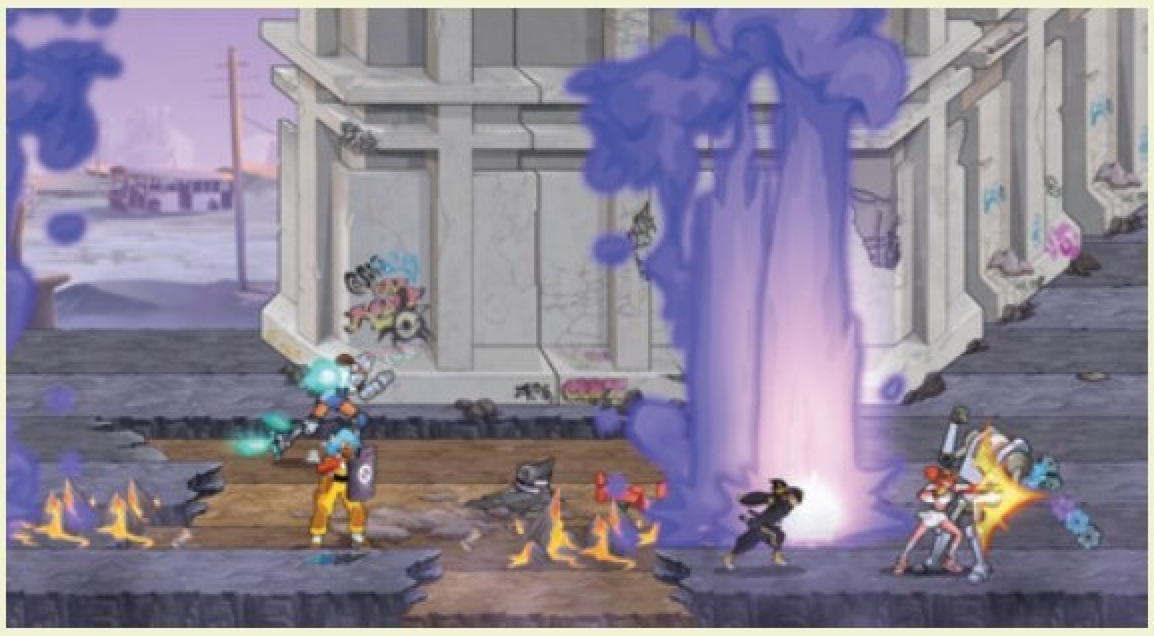
EARTHBLADE

Details on Earthblade are scarce, but any game from the team behind Celeste and Towerfall has our attention. In this side-scrolling "explor-action" game, you play as Névoa, a purple, horned child of Fate returning to Earth. Explore a seamless pixel world, battle monsters, and uncover mysteries, all to a soundtrack from acclaimed Celeste composer, Lena Raine. **BY CHARLES HARTE**



PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA) **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Extremely OK Games **DEVELOPER** Extremely OK Games **RELEASE** 2024

RA RA BOOM



Four teenage ninja cheerleaders must take down a malevolent A.I. in this surprising twist on classic brawling action. Characters switch between several 2D lanes to clearly understand who you're targeting with massive upgradeable combos. The bombastic fighting is grounded by a cinematic story about grief and friendship, suggesting these ninjas have more to share than just another punch or kick. **BY MATT MILLER** ■

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Gylee Games **DEVELOPER** Gylee Games **RELEASE** Fall

Previews

spotlight

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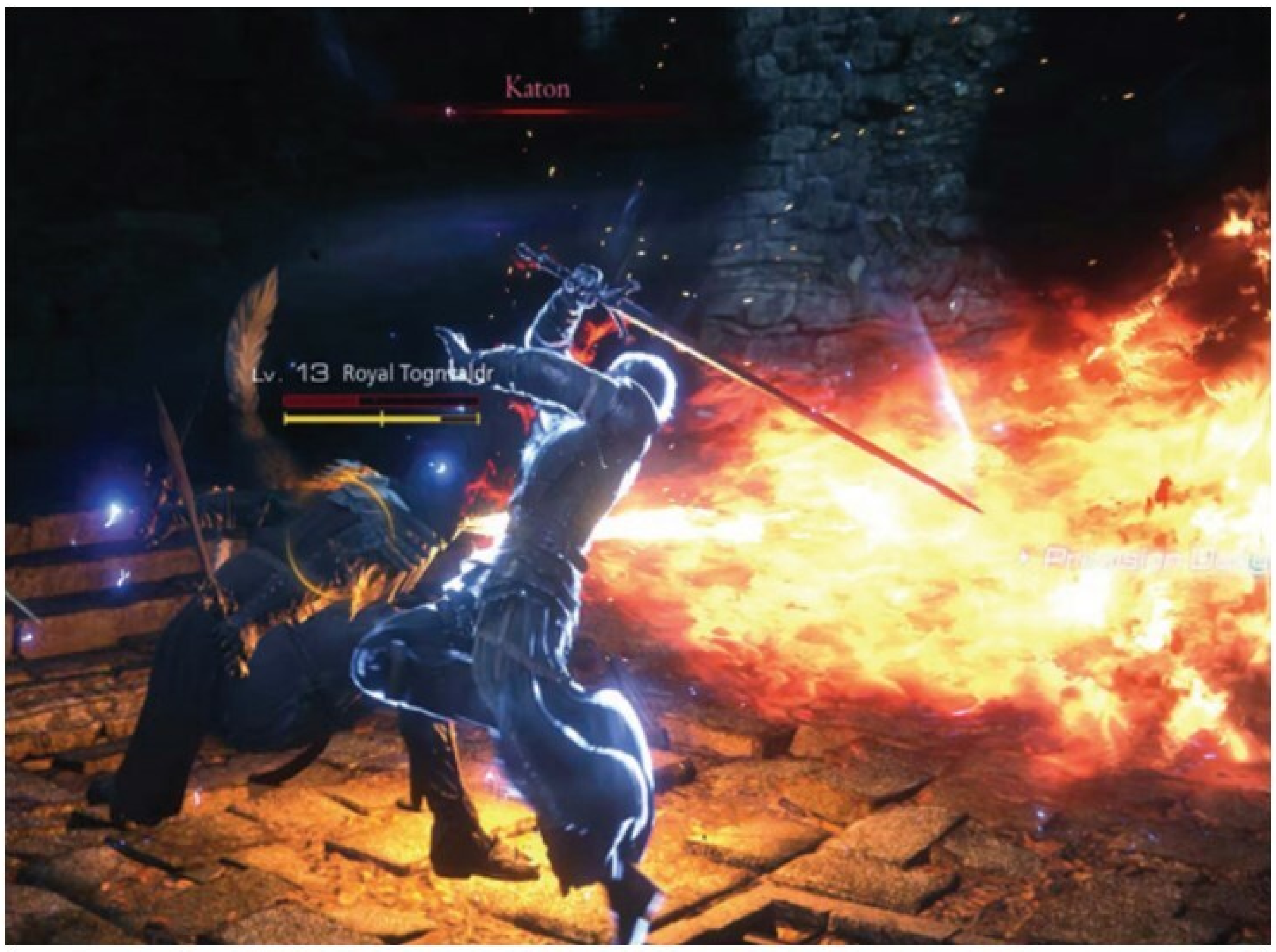
FINAL FANTASY XVI

Ifrit May Cry



Since the reveal of Final Fantasy XVI in 2020, my questions have continued to grow. Mind you, my questions are firmly planted in the fascination of everything surrounding this game, like how Final Fantasy XIV studio Creative Business Unit III is developing the title with Naoki Yoshida in the producer role or how former Devil May Cry 5 combat designer Ryota Suzuki is the game's combat director. Will FFXVI feature the storytelling prowess of FFXIV? Will its combat go full stylish action?

After a recent hands-on preview for FFXVI, many questions linger, but I'm now ready to let myself be fully excited for the game's release this summer. After nearly two hours controlling protagonist Clive and the Ifrit Eikon, I'm most impressed by how well Suzuki's Devil May Cry-isms work in Final Fantasy.

Without spoiling much, Clive's story centers on revenge, spanning decades of his life. We primarily control just this character, but party members do join Clive, Yoshida says, however they're always controlled by A.I.. Most of my playthrough had me running Clive and Cidolfus Telamon (always a Cid) through a castle dungeon.

FFXVI's combat is faster than anything in the series. Fighting is combo-driven, reliant on a mix of Clive's sword attacks, Eikonic abilities, and standard magic. After a short time familiarizing myself, I was pulling off impressive combos. I start by slashing my sword, then press Circle to use my Phoenix Eikon's dash-teleport ability to close the distance between myself and the next enemy. As I finish that enemy, I tap R2 to switch from my Phoenix ability wheel to my Titan Eikon wheel because its Circle ability allows me to draw upon a large rock shield to block incoming attacks.

With each weapon wheel, Clive has special abilities to use after they charge. The Phoenix, at this point in the game, has large AOE fire attacks and blasts, with one lifting enemies into the air, while the Titan uses a large rock hammer to deal extreme damage. The Titan's abilities are especially fun because releasing the button during a specific window deals extra damage. In between all of this, I'm dodging unblockable attacks and parrying others. During a boss fight, I'm slamming buttons frenetically, seeing just how reactive the combat is, and to my surprise, it keeps up quite well. Devil May Cry fans will feel right at home in FFXVI.

But fret not if action games aren't your thing; special ring accessories let you customize the difficulty on the fly. You can equip these rings to augment how hard or easy combat is. I had access to a ring that temporarily slowed time before attacks, allowing me to easily press R1 to dodge, another that automatically selected the attacks Torgal (your dog companion that, yes, you can pet) performed, and others that auto-dodged most attacks or used potions automatically when health was low. There's even one that turns the game's heavy action into a one-button show that performs the combos for you.

I was also able to fight the Garuda Eikon as Clive, and while it was flashy and cinematic, it was less exciting. The battle played out in a tight arena, and I button-mashed until prompts appeared to further the fight. It was ultimately boring compared to the rest of the combat.

The Eikon vs. Eikon battle – my Ifrit vs. Garuda – was much more thrilling, controlling like a Kaiju fight. The two massive summons are slow, but hit hard, and watching the scenery around me crumble was a nice touch. I only had access to a few attacks as Ifrit, and Yoshida says the fight reflects Clive's inexperience when tapping into this Eikon.

What's especially interesting is Yoshida says this battle is like no other. Whereas this one felt like a Kaiju fight – Yoshida says Evangelion, Godzilla, and Ultraman inspired it – a battle with Phoenix will be more like a 3D shooter, while another with the Titan Eikon will be more about high-speed action.

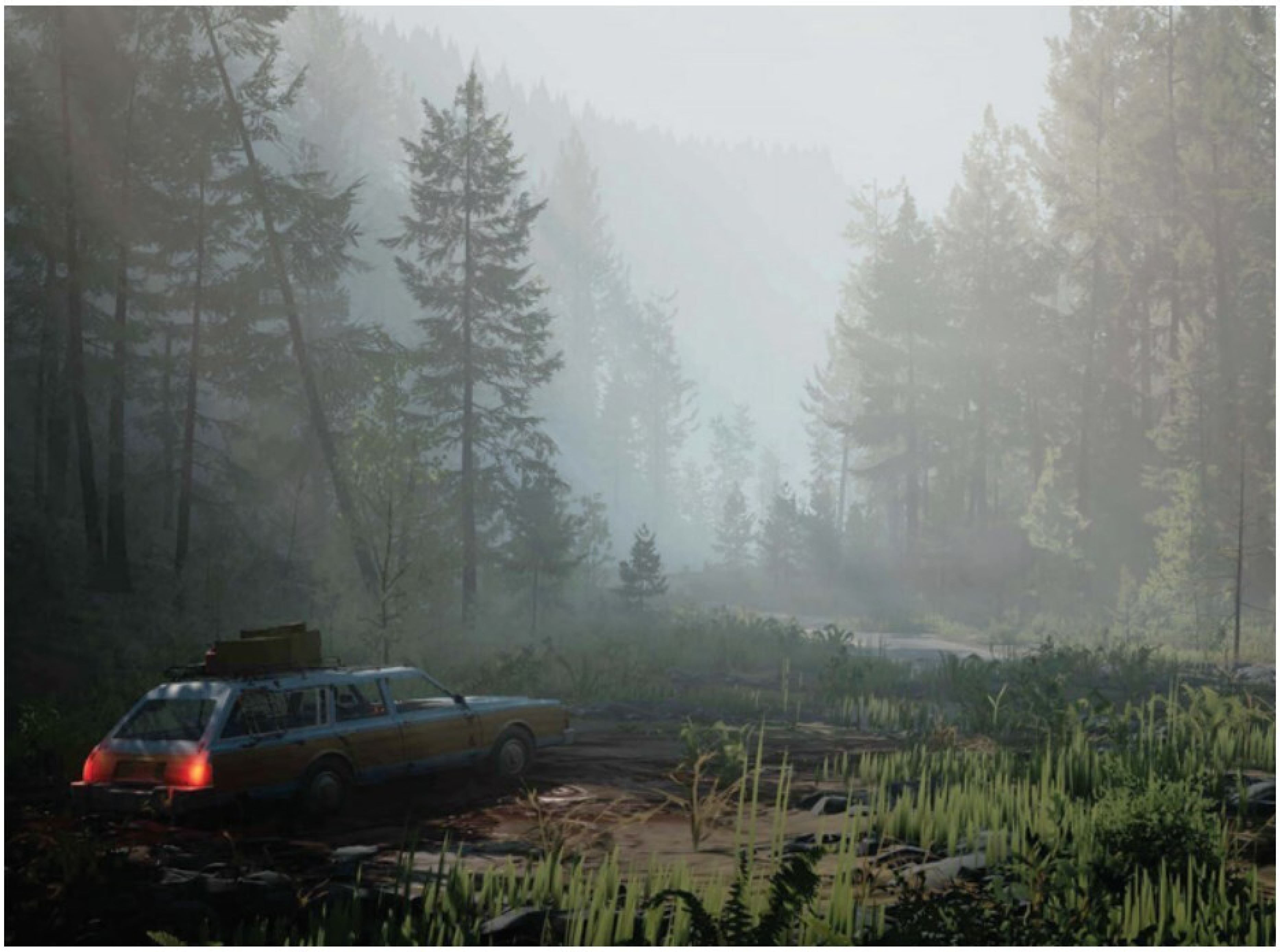
The taste of the score I heard was unsurprisingly fantastic, considering it's coming from FFXIV composer Masayoshi Soken. The voice acting is also great, although overly medieval British, and the characters and their convictions are enticing. I was least impressed visually, but what I played through was dark and mostly took place in a nondescript castle. Still, if what I played is any indication, FFXVI is looking to shake up this long-running series in exciting ways. I still have questions, but this first impression is a strong one.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Creative Business Unit III **RELEASE** June 22

PACIFIC DRIVE

Dude, where's my car? I'm gonna die



The reveal of Pacific Drive last year was immediately captivating. I liked what I saw in the initial trailer, but what I found especially intriguing was that most of the game happens through a first-person view of someone driving an old station wagon through a beautiful but distraught Pacific Northwest forest. Rarely do driving games force a first-person view, and even more rarely do driving games deviate from being a racer.

Pacific Drive is doing both, and after viewing roughly 30 minutes of gameplay during a virtual preview, I'm even more intrigued. In a way, Pacific Drive is a racing game, but you're not racing against other players – you're racing against a biome ravaged by a mysterious sci-fi force that controls anomalies set on ending your run.

After filling up the station wagon with gas, repairing its doors, and preparing the beater for a drive, the Ironwood Studios developer planned their next procedurally-generated trek through the forest, one of the various biomes in the game. They charted the zone, picked a node, which acts as spots on the map you can start a run from, and were off on their next drive. The mysterious sci-fi force attacking the player during this drive makes the forest feel alive. Non-human mechanical anomalies like abductors use a magnet to drag your car around. Crawlers create electric fences in front of you, and dust bunnies use spikes to bring your vehicle to a halt. Even the ground erupts with pillars of stone to stop you, and trees fall to do the same. All of this can damage the car, and you'll need to repair it using a blow torch, other tools, and resources you must scavenge by exiting the vehicle.

Ironwood remained secretive about the ultimate objective of Pacific Drive, but in this preview, the developer playing gathered resources to strengthen the car so they could later progress further through the exclusion zone they needed to escape from. Your drives, which can only last a few minutes if you're not careful, or as long as half an hour or more, are time trials. Stay too long, and a battle royale-esque storm closes in on you, urging you to escape through the large red light that acts as a beacon. If you succeed, you are transported back to the safety of your garage. Fail, and you lose a chunk of the resources you collected.

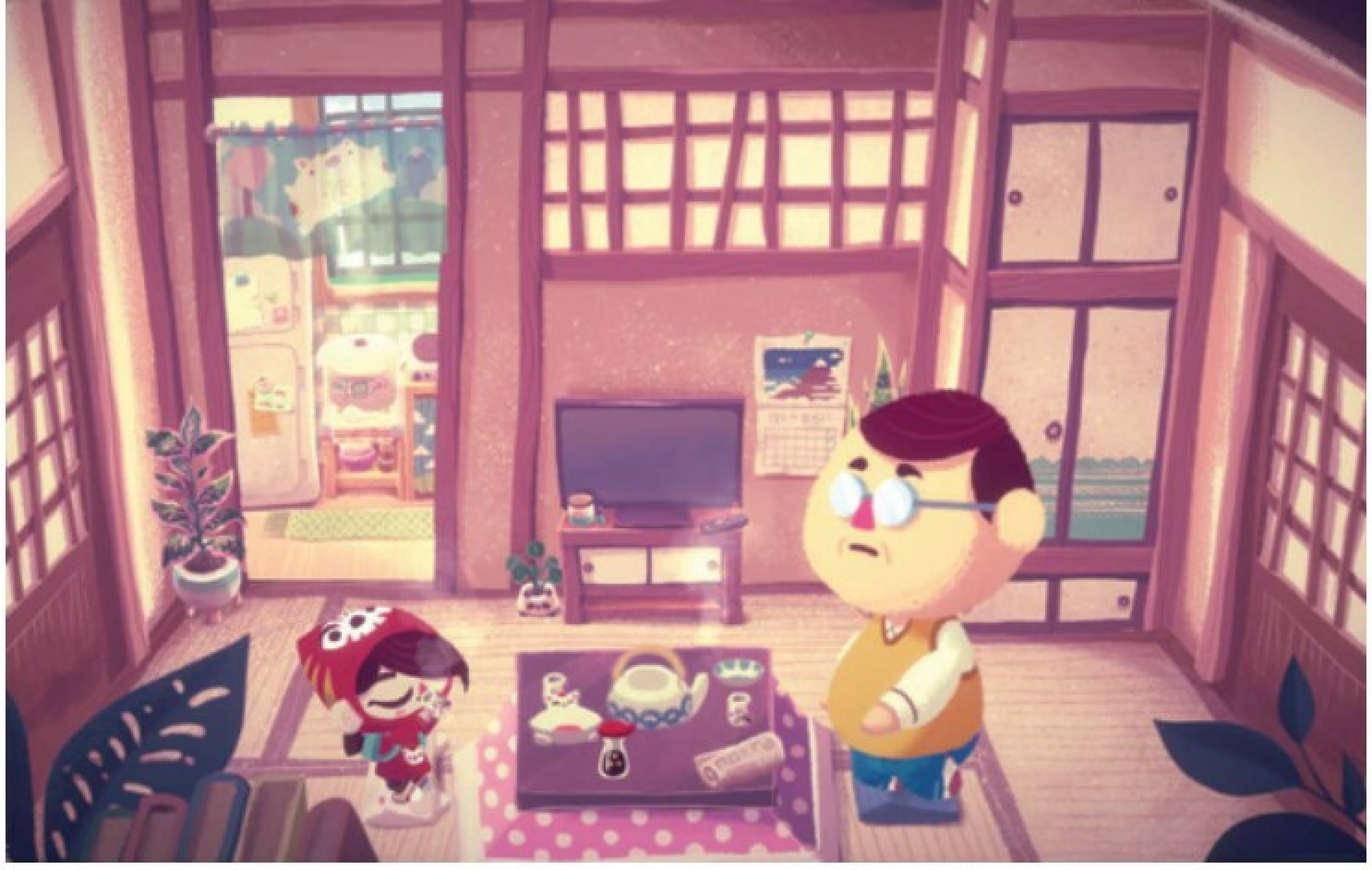
I don't typically enjoy driving in first-person; the third-person view that hovers behind a car allows me to see more and feel more control over the vehicle. But Pacific Drive seems to have slowed down the driving pace to give players a chance to control a station wagon going through sci-fi hell reasonably, and I appreciate that.

Ironwood emphasized the relationship it wants players to build with the vehicle, describing it as symbiotic. This is why your car, throughout the game, remains the station wagon. You can upgrade it in various ways, both mechanically and aesthetically (you can't pet the vehicle but can pat the bobblehead in it), but that's the extent of differences between your car and mine.

More than anything else, Pacific Drive is a survival game, complete with the usual robust crafting systems. You can craft on the go or use special machines in the garage that give higher yields. Resources make your vehicle stronger, which means you can go further, which allows the collect-upgrade loop to reset in a new way and continue again.

Having not played it, I'm not entirely sold on the experience as I want to know how it feels to do what I'll be doing most of the game: driving. But if this preview was just a taste of the game's world and systems, which feel inspired and new in the driving genre, Pacific Drive is a trip I'm excited to begin. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ironwood Studios
DEVELOPER Ironwood Studios
RELEASE 2023



MINEKO'S NIGHT MARKET

Open for business

Fans of cozy life sims and Japanese culture should keep an eye on Mineko's Night Market. This charming indie stars a young girl named Mineko, who moves to a small Japanese island suffering a decline. The island has struggled in recent years due to an exodus of residents. The remaining superstitious population worships a cat deity named Abe, and the appearance of cats around the island may signal its presence. On top of that, government agents have encroached upon the island for unknown reasons. Mineko takes it upon herself to get to the bottom of these mysteries while earning a pretty penny selling items to a Night Market.

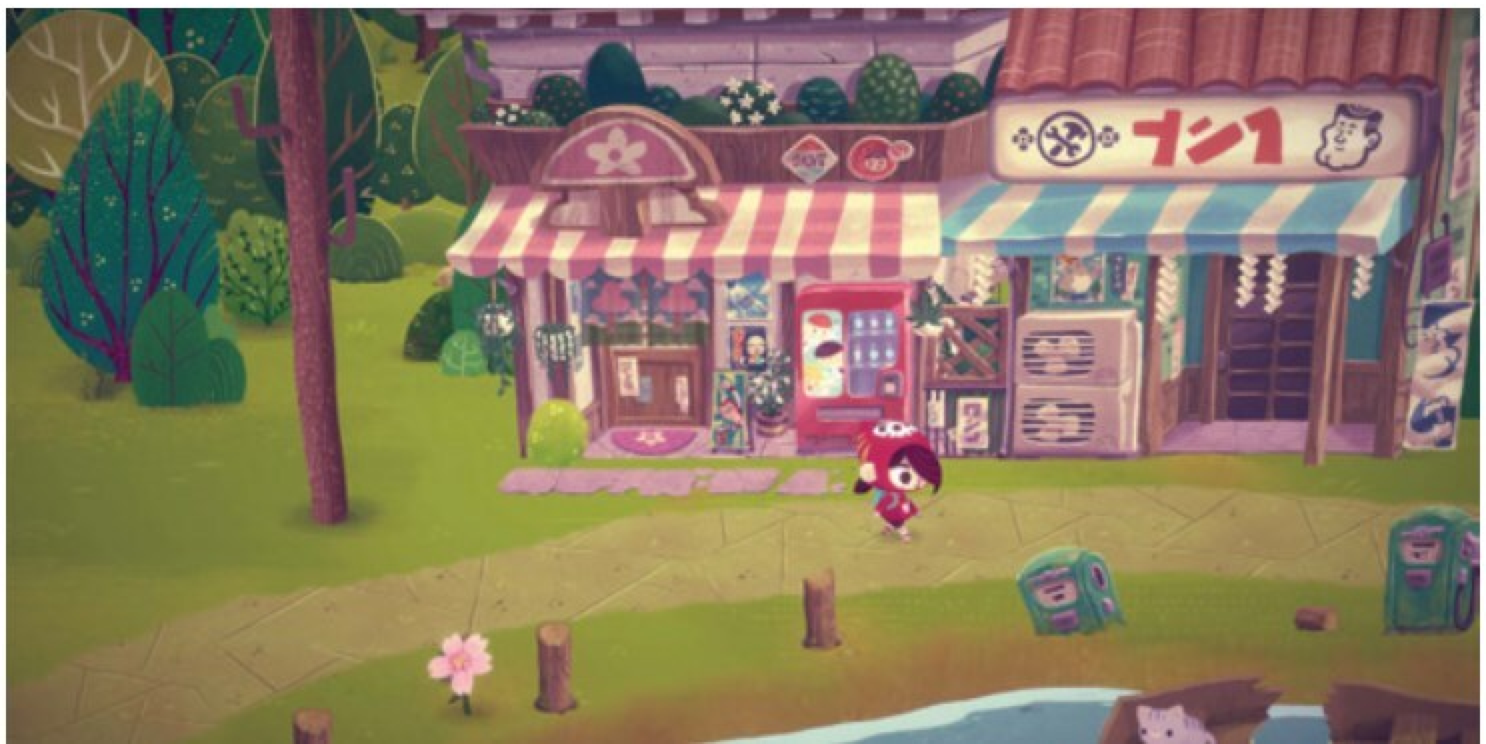
The game's namesake is a store where players can barter and trade crafted items, though it only opens at night. You'll create items such as flower beds or juices by gathering resources and crafting them at a workbench. You'll need the cash from these sales to purchase goods for the island's needy residents, which increases your multi-tiered bond with them.

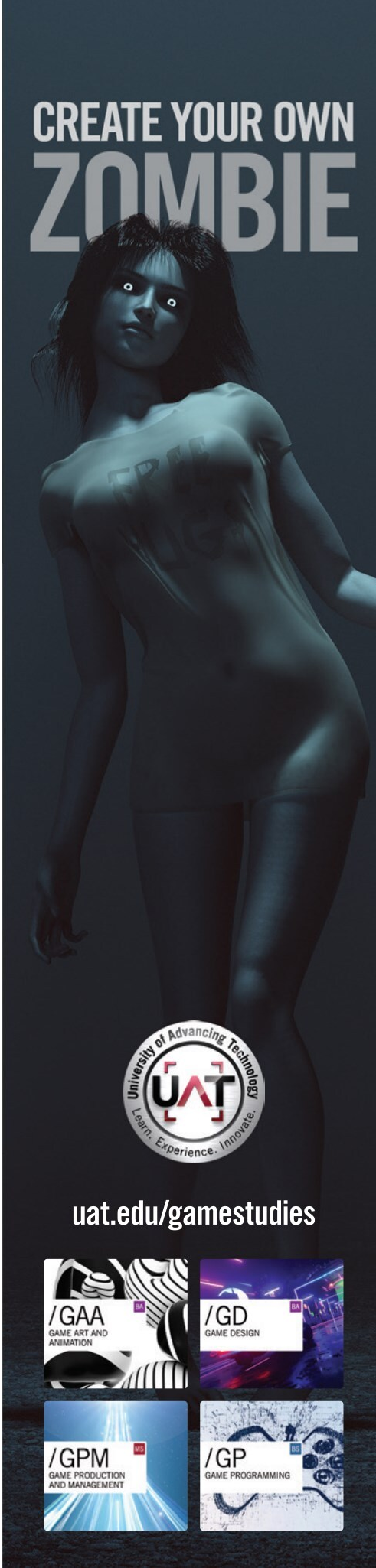
Day-to-day life on the island consists of completing various jobs and daily activities, solving puzzles, and chatting with your neighbors. The island hosts several biomes players unlock over time. Sometimes agents occupy these zones, requiring players to engage in light stealth sequences to circumvent and clear them out. In one instance, Mineko must free several captive cats while avoiding the agents' gaze. Eventually, Mineko obtains several disguises to help her waltz into restricted zones undetected.

With a story that unfolds over four seasons and multiple years, Mineko offers a leisurely-paced adventure designed to delight players for the long haul. The illustrated storybook art looks fantastic, making the game as easy on the eyes as it is to play. We're excited to see how this island mystery shapes up when Mineko's Night Market launches on Switch, PC, and Mac sometime this year.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Switch • PC • Mac **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Humble Games **DEVELOPER** Meowza Games **RELEASE** 2023




CREATE YOUR OWN
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University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.
uat.edu/gamestudies
/GAA GAME ART AND ANIMATION BA
/GD GAME DESIGN BA
/GPM GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT MS
/GP GAME PROGRAMMING BS

WWE 2K23

WarGames!

WWE 2K22 relaunched the franchise on the right foot, and 2K23 builds upon that momentum. The improvements and additions from last year's game remain intact and expanded in some cases. The legendary John Cena graces the cover and stars in the game's centerpiece Showcase mode. That's all well and good, but the addition of the long-requested WarGames match may be 2K23's most exciting bullet point.

I took a hands-on tour of WWE 2K23 during a preview event to get a handle on how it's shaping up. If there are any major gameplay differences between this and last year's game, they're subtle based on what I played, which isn't necessarily bad. Gameplay is a little quicker and tighter, but it doesn't feel like a substantially different game than 2K22. That includes some old annoyances, such as how finicky picking up weapons can be.

A rework to how pinfalls work is the biggest exception, though it's more of a return to its previous form; the pinned player stops a meter within a moving, gradually shrinking box to kick out. I've never been particularly fond of this mechanic, which is why I'm glad it's optional; you can switch to mashing buttons to escape pins in the settings. Speaking of pinfalls, 2K23 adds female referees for the first time. Based on the superstars and entrances I witnessed, the presentation looks as sharp as it usually does, though a couple of wrestler's faces, such as Ronda Rousey, appear less polished than others.

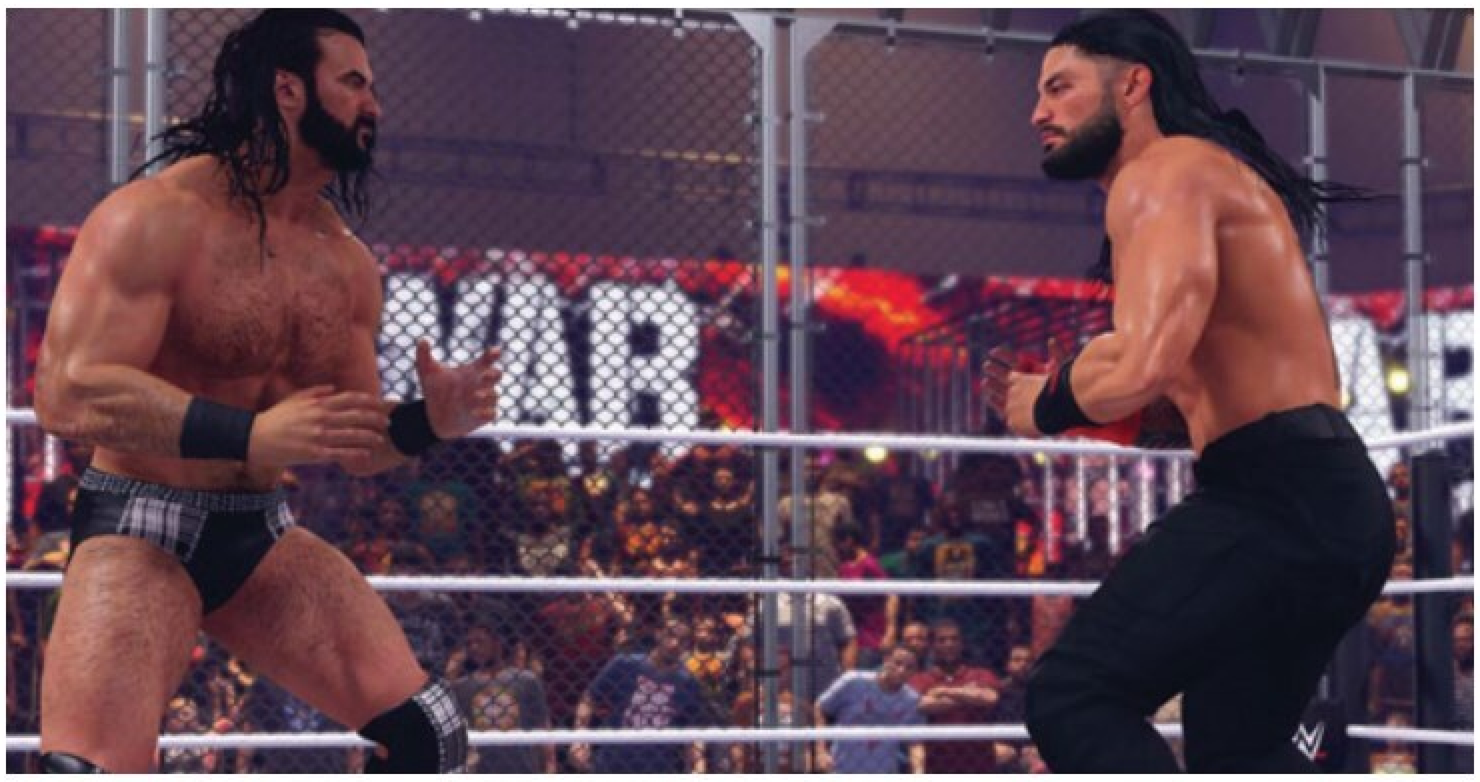
Showcase, WWE 2K's playable documentary mode, highlights the career of John Cena but with a unique twist. This time you'll relive Cena's career from the perspective of the opponents who served him his most defining losses. For example, I controlled Rob Van Dam and beat Cena for the WWE title at one of the most iconic – and infamous – shows of John's career: ECW One Night Stand 2006. Showcase still tasks players with completing mid-match objectives to earn unlockable bonuses such as playable Cena variants, and matches feature the slick mid-match transitions from gameplay to actual match footage. Cena also provides narration in the well-produced sitdown interviews and

video packages. With a stellar career spanning 20 years, Showcase has the potential to offer a strong catalog of matches and moments to relive, and its premise should be especially satisfying to the "Cena Sucks" crowd.

I took part in several WarGames matches, both alone and with human competitors in multiplayer. Visual Concepts faithfully recreates WWE's spin on this former WCW staple, which, for the uninitiated, consists of two rings joined side by side with a jumbo-sized steel cage wrapped around both. Two teams, either 3v3 or 4v4 in 2K23, face off, with the match beginning one-on-one before members from each team take turns joining the match one at a time at regular intervals. Pinfalls or submissions can't occur until all competitors enter, and it's one fall to a finish.

I had a lot of fun with this match. Playing as one of the starting wrestlers puts the pressure of dealing as much damage as possible before potentially getting double-teamed by an opposing teammate entering the match, depending on whether or not you have the turn advantage. I also felt the same anxiety wrestlers express on TV when watching teammates get destroyed while I await my turn to even the odds.

In a great touch, superstars entering the match can bring weapons into the ring. It isn't WarGames without a few chairs, stop signs, and tables, after all. 2K also captures unique spots you only see in this match. At one point, I saw Cody Rhodes jump from the top rope of one ring to the other, then hit a springboard elbow drop. You can, of course, climb to the top of the cage, where you can slug it out with anyone who pursues or risk it all by taking a death-defying leap.



Although they weren't available in my demo, other modes from last year's entry return with expansions. MyGM adds new general managers and more options for building the best shows and brands. The story-driven MyRise, in which you take a custom-made rookie from the Performance Center to Wrestlemania, is back with different storylines for the men's and women's divisions. MyFaction now supports online multiplayer, providing a new avenue to build, manage, and battle four-person factions. Universe mode boasts a reworked story system, among other updates. Lastly, the robust Creation Suite now includes cross-platform community creations, and custom arenas can be played online.

WWE 2K23 rides the positive momentum of its predecessor and the Triple-H-led resurgence of quality in WWE TV. Here's hoping that engenders an equally entertaining product when fans step into its ring on March 17. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 6 Player Fighting (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Visual Concepts **RELEASE** March 17

PLANET OF LANA

A beautiful-if-familiar world

Planet of Lana is the next in a long line of moody side-scrolling indies that became prominent following Playdead's 2010 game, Limbo. Compared to Playdead's work, Planet of Lana, developed by Wishfully, is bright, colorful, and, at least on the surface, not overtly depressing. We've seen our character, Lana – who looks a lot like the protagonist of The Last Guardian, appropriately enough – riding through massive deserts, staring in awe at giant, terrifying creatures, and exploring deep, lush greenspaces. What we haven't seen, though, is extended looks at gameplay. At least not until recently, when I saw a behind-closed-doors demo at a recent ID@Xbox event.

Our demo begins in a swamp area. Lana is dropped in and free to explore (which, in this case, means moving to the right). Lana has a small companion named Mui – which looks like a cat that swallowed a balloon whole – that follows her around, and as our demo lead tells us, the tiny creature has proved herself a helpful ally in this strange, alien world.

Mui inspects a body of water, indicating to Lana that, like every good cat, she's afraid of water – a problem you must solve. Planet of Lana, as described by its developer, is a "cinematic puzzle adventure," telling the story of an 11-year-old out to save her sister and the people of her home fishing village, which has been invaded by a race of robotic enemies. But the puzzle at hand is getting Mui across a small body of water – a problem Lana solves by finding a downed tree merely 10 feet away.

Planet of Lana is undeniably gorgeous. It has a hand-painted, watercolor aesthetic that brings its colors to life in lush, vibrant ways. Aesthetically, it feels reminiscent of more whimsical Studio Ghibli films and, again, The Last Guardian. In fact, Takeshi Furukawa, the game's composer, was also the composer of The Last Guardian.

Her hydrophobia aside, Mui helps Lana solve puzzles throughout the game. After crossing the small body of water, Mui climbs a small cliff face ahead of us to knock down a vine allowing Lana to climb up. Later, the two must craft a makeshift bridge to cross another body of water. Lana can go so far as to control Mui's hypnotic abilities, such as in one moment when the cat hypnotizes a large creature capable of affecting water levels.

It consistently looks excellent, but none of it's all that exciting or interesting. At this point, there have been plenty of narrative side scrollers where you slowly meander to one side, solving small, menial puzzles while a mostly-dialogue-less story plays out in front of you. It's a bit old hat, and I struggle to see what Planet of Lana does differently than what a dozen other games have already done before. It looks beautiful, but I'm not sure that's enough to draw me in, as does every other narrative side-scroller from the last decade.

Of course, other trailers have shown action-packed moments full of high-speed chases, and other biomes look more engaging than this sleepy swamp I see in my demo. I sure hope so because as I watch, each small puzzle looks more the same. Solve a mindless puzzle, swing across a small chasm, find a way to get Mui across water, rinse and repeat. The developer says it's made a lot of variety and an "epic adventure" for the player, but at least in this showing, I'm not sure I've seen what they're talking about.

We'll see. I'm still looking for something particularly exciting to draw me in. Planet of Lana will be released at some point this year for Xbox consoles and PC. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Thunderful Publishing
DEVELOPER Wishfully
RELEASE 2023

MEET YOUR MAKER

Base-building brutality

In the barren, post-apocalyptic world of Meet Your Maker, nothing is more valuable than Genmat, the key to restoring human life on Earth. Base builders would kill to protect it, and raiders would die for a chance to steal it. You have the opportunity to do both, looting player-created outposts, then returning home to construct your own. During my few hours with the beta, I was delighted by this gameplay loop and eagerly anticipate the full release to see the extent of creativity players will have to offer.

Before building any levels, you must learn how to raid them. Loadouts start simple (one ranged weapon and one melee), but if you play more, you can also unlock defensive tools. These weapons offer a lot of variety, allowing you to change your approach drastically. For example, one ranged weapon has very little ammo and a longer reload time but can destroy traps. It was perfect for an outpost full of spikes I needed to take out from far away but not as good for the one with a dense pocket of enemies in the starting room. Once you pick the right tools for the job, it's time to start the heist.

When raiding, your goal is to find the heart of the outpost, swipe the Genmat, and return to the desert unscathed. It sounds easy enough until you realize the outpost is filled with traps and enemies, all of which kill you in a single hit. It's an often-harrowing experience that killed me repeatedly, but that only made my inevitable victories even more thrilling. And since they only take a few minutes to complete, even the most demanding levels didn't frustrate me. I was mostly just amazed that other players could be so creatively brutal. It inspired me to go and create my own dastardly death traps.

Outpost design is like a mix between Minecraft's creative mode and Super Mario Maker. It takes place in a first-person view, where you fly around and place blocks, traps, and enemies. Then, you can test it yourself and see how easy or hard it is. To balance the challenge level from outpost to outpost, each creation has to hit a minimum number of traps and enemies while falling under a maximum number of blocks placed. You also must have a clear path for your harvester, a little dog-like robot that paces from the entrance to the core. These restrictions still leave much wiggle room, keeping the outposts relatively balanced.

Once your outpost is complete, you can set it to public and leave it to be played by other people. The most satisfying experience of my preview period was coming back to the game a few days later and seeing how many raiders my traps and enemies had killed. Returning to the building mode, you can see where they died and learn what's working and what isn't.

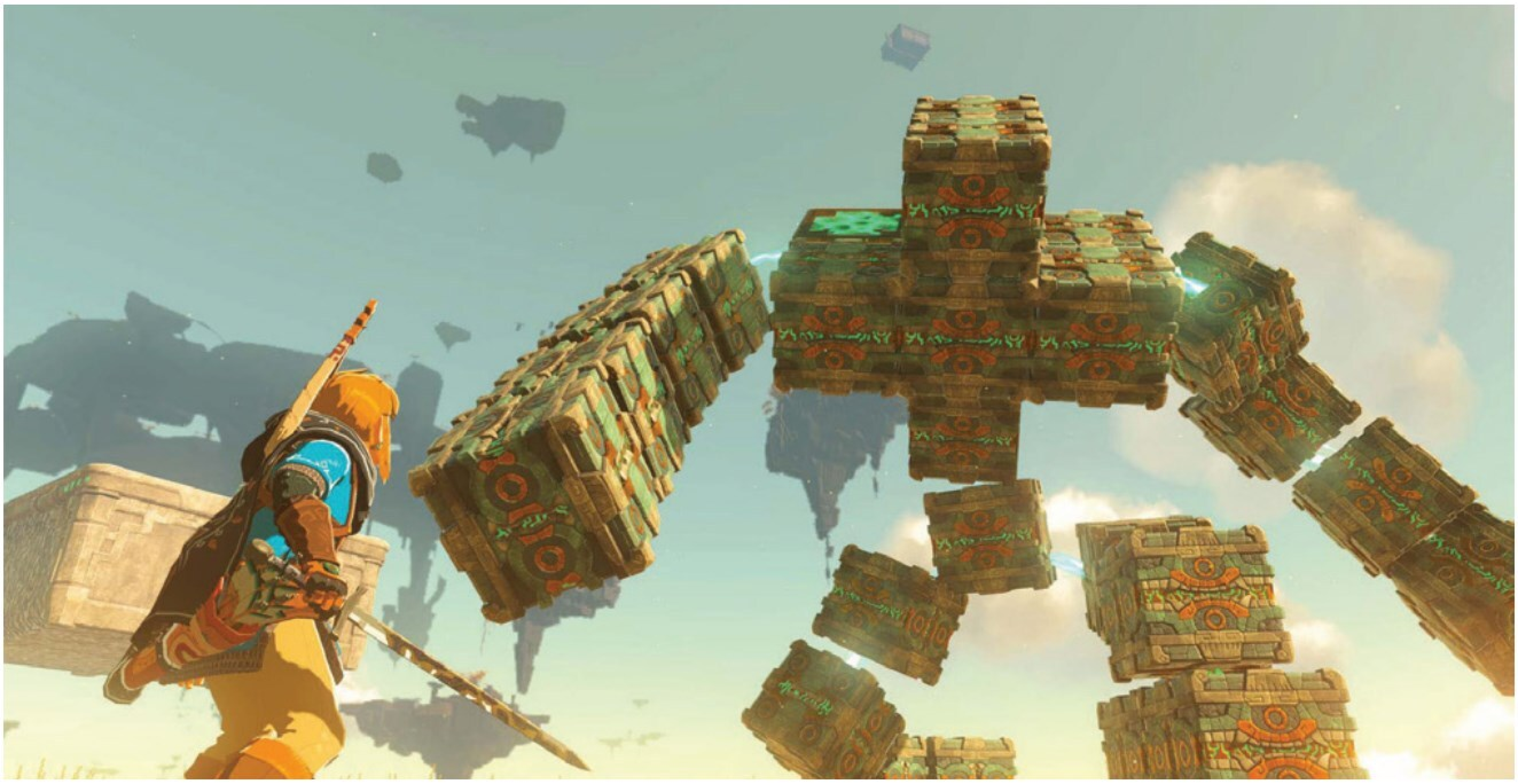
Both of Meet Your Maker's main modes reward you with resources you can use to upgrade your arsenal. New weapons, traps, enemies, and playstyle-altering suits expand your toolset and diversify the raiding process even more. My successful outpost defense allowed me to unlock a new weapon to make my raiding process smoother. With enough successful raids with this new weapon, I'll unlock a new flying enemy to make my outpost even stronger. It's a promising loop.

Meet Your Maker is advertised as a bleak, decaying world of people scrambling for survival, but its actual gameplay experience feels much different. The dreary exterior disguises a product encouraging player-driven creativity and innovation. The experience will only improve as they add new traps, guards, and weapons, and I can't wait to see how it lives up to its potential. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter/Strategy (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Behaviour Interactive Inc.
DEVELOPER Behaviour Interactive Inc. **RELEASE** April 4

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Ganondorf speaks, Hyrule trembles



In The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, the largely solitary journey is punctuated with a battle against one of the most fearsome and intimidating forms of Ganon ever seen. Calamity Ganon was ugly, powerful, and unique in how his battle played out, while Dark Beast Ganon served as an excellent victory lap with Hyrule Castle as the backdrop. Though Calamity Ganon is memorable for myriad reasons, he didn't deliver much in the way of character. With The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, that appears to be one of the many areas where this long-awaited sequel deviates from its predecessor.

As our latest look at Tears of the Kingdom kicks off, new flying enemies circle a dark and stormy Hyrule Field. Mysterious glyphs and towers with strange spotlights shining from the ground illuminate the rocky landscape, hinting at new enigmas within this seemingly infinite explorable version of Hyrule. Bokoblins and Lizalfos work in and patrol what appears to be some kind of cavern, again teasing an expanded underground network from what we saw in Breath of the Wild.

As the camera emerges from the caves, we glimpse a multi-headed dragon (perhaps a modern incarnation of Gleeok from the first Legend of Zelda) on a half-destroyed bridge. It's then that we hear it: the voice of Ganondorf. "Rise. Rise, my servants. Sweep over Hyrule. Eliminate this kingdom and her allies. Leave no survivors!"

With that command, the Blood Moon rises and Ganondorf's minions scatter across Hyrule in a downpour of malice. Rocks crumble, explosions erupt, and cliffsides collapse as Ganondorf's influence spreads across Hyrule in a fit of rage. It's unclear if this is the result of the Blood Moon, or if some of these occurrences are unrelated, solely stitched together for the sake of this trailer. Nonetheless, the result is a terrifying glimpse into the power Ganondorf wields.

While the Bokoblins and Lizalfos appear, so do other enemy types we didn't see in Breath of the Wild. One new type resembles ReDeads, the zombie-like enemies that freeze Link where he stands. I also spot a Bokoblin with a horn, who seems able to rally his allies, and a wyvern-like creature carrying a Moblin like a demented delivery service. Combined with the enemies that rain down seemingly in conjunction with the Blood Moon, that monster type appears to indicate that enemies can pop up in front of Link when he least expects it.

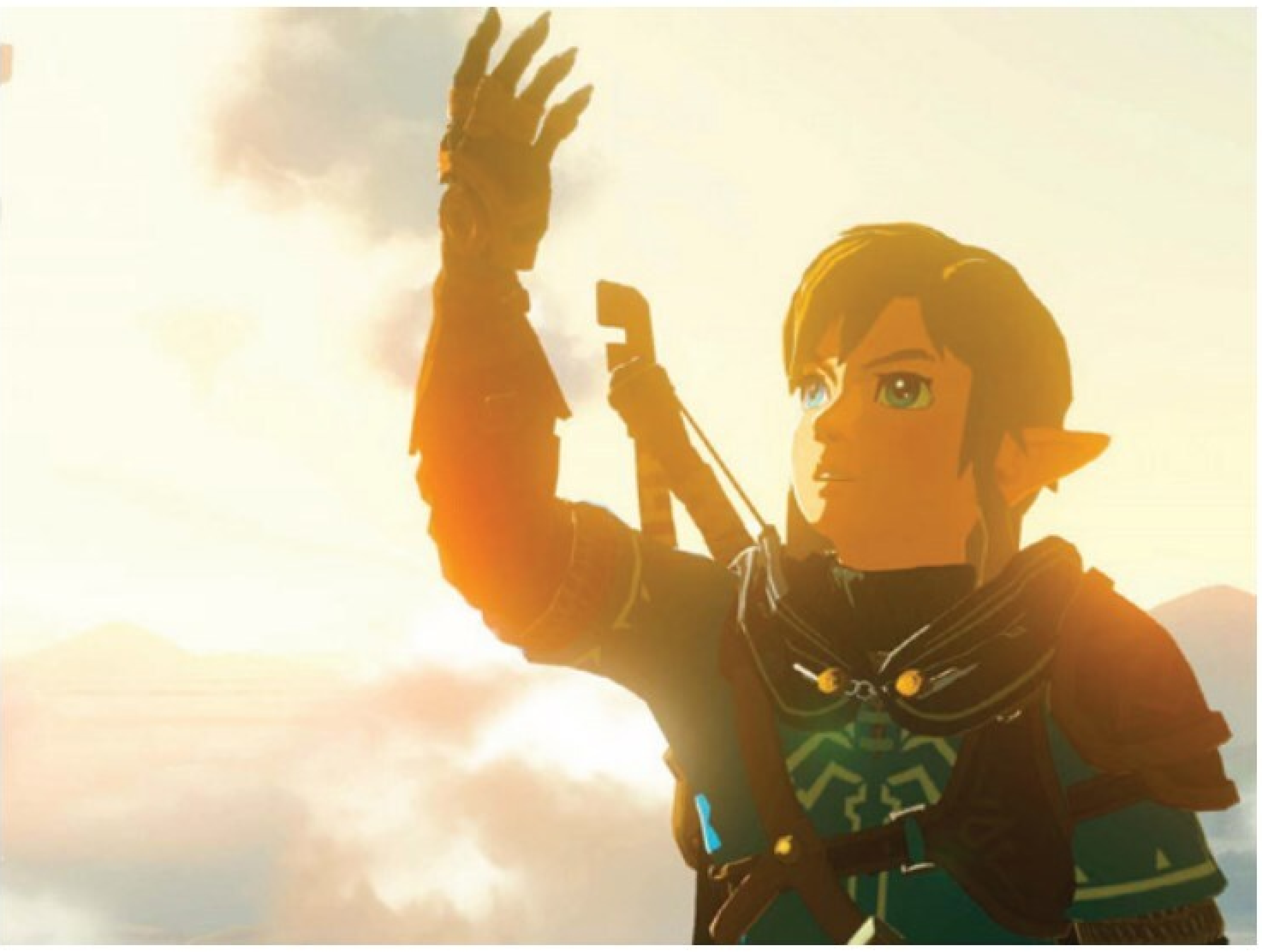
This climactic and harrowing sequence culminates with Ganondorf's reanimated corpse springing back to life. All hope seems lost as Zelda says a chill-inducing, "But Link ... I am not sure you'll be able to stop him." In stark, hopeful contrast to the early parts of this trailer, the sun comes out, the skies turn blue, and Link takes the spotlight as the music swells heroically.

Ganon isn't the only character who has new tricks up his sleeve. After skydiving from one of the new floating islands down to Hyrule's surface, Link takes the fight to the Demon King's minions. Using his trusty bow, Link fires a new arrow type, which homes in on a new flying enemy, blasting it out of the sky. Next, we see Link grinding on rails along a cliffside; it looks like he can now perform this as part of expanded shield surfing mechanics. Link also looks like he retains at least some of the runes' powers from Breath of the Wild, thanks to his mutated arm, while also gaining access to a suite of new powers and weapons.

In a previous trailer, we saw a flamethrower attached to his shield. In this most recent look, we see a cannon stuck on the end of the stick; with a front-flip motion, Link can send bombs in the direction of his foes. Perhaps most curious are the vehicles. First, we see Link driving some kind of dune buggy made from wood planks and statue heads. Next, he's floating upwards in a hot-air balloon. Finally, he's soaring from island to island in a hovercraft. Each of these vehicles appears makeshift, with the components potentially ripped from Hyrule's ruins and tied together using a strange green goo. We don't yet have confirmation, but between these vehicles and the amalgamated appearance of some of Link's new weapons, it looks like crafting and customization could play a considerable role in Tears of the Kingdom.

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom somehow feels bigger in every way compared to the preceding Breath of the Wild. That's no small feat, considering how massive the Switch launch title was. However, if Tears of the Kingdom can successfully implement the various improvements and new mechanics it is hinting at, all while weaving a compelling narrative of Ganondorf attempting to conquer Hyrule once again, Nintendo could be well on its way to delivering a worthy sequel to one of the greatest video games ever released. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM Switch
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** May 12



CRIME BOSS: ROCKAY CITY

Roguelike celebrity lookalike criminals

During The Game Awards 2022, a show that was full of surprise unveilings, Crime Boss: Rockay City stood out as one of the stranger, more unexpected reveals. The trailer for the game showed Florida in the '90s and then proceeded to introduce in-game appearances from actors Michael Madsen, Kim Basinger, Damion Poitier, Danny Trejo, Danny Glover, Michael Rooker, Vanilla Ice, and Chuck Norris, who were all lip-synching to the trailer's song, "Connected" by Stereo Mc's.

"You spotted that – well done!" Jarek Kolar, Crime Boss' Head of Development says. "We are early adopters of the Epic's metahuman feature in Unreal Engine so, it is extremely easy for us to let our characters speak. We just record the speech and the character can speak it, using their style of speaking."

One thing that wasn't completely clear from the trailer was what kind of game it was. The setting and tone seemed to imply something close to Grand Theft Auto, but Crime Boss is not an open world game. "There is no traveling, or exploration," Kolar says. "Every mission is accessed from the map and will be a playable 'game area' within the larger city with levels composed from modular pieces."

It's a first-person shooter about growing and maintaining a crime empire. Kolar refers to the game as an "organized crime game" where you, as Travis Baker (Michael Madsen's character) must build your crime organization through a series of first-person shooter missions.

The story is a crime fantasy narrative, but the punishment for failure is going to be harsh. According to Kolar, crime will not pay in Rockay City if you're not careful. There are no checkpoints or saves and permadeath is real. If Sheriff Norris (Chuck Norris) catches you, that's it. "Losing any criminal from the crew is painful, but not critical. But losing the life of the boss is the end of the story," Kolar Says.

In terms of the moment-to-moment gameplay, Crime Boss is a first-person shooter with some elements of stealth. The strategic part of building your crime empire takes place outside of the levels where your focus is on shooting and staying alive.

Crime Boss features a core, single-player experience with cutscenes and narration. That campaign cannot be played co-op, but developer Ingame Studios has included cooperative options in the game. "For the four-player co-op experience we have the series of mini campaigns in the Crime Stories game mode, where players can join the challenging missions, with the best heister and most powerful guns," Kolar says. Like the single-player campaign, these co-op missions include elements of progression as well as comparable, harsh failure punishments when playing alone.

The biggest selling point of the game, or at least the thing that might get people in the door to check it out are the celebrity appearances. "The game portrays these actors in their physicality of the late '80s and early '90s. For example Mr. Chuck Norris is now 82 years old so it was not possible to use photoscan or mocap," Kolar says, "But they did record the voice lines for their characters, and sometimes also amended the script lines with their take on those characters."

It will be strange to see how those actors work in the game and how large their roles ultimately are. When asked if there is anyone who hasn't been revealed yet that might be a surprise, Kolar offered no hints. "Just wait and see it for yourself," Kolar says, "We are always thinking of ideas on how to implement more celebrities into the world of Crime Boss."

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 505 Games **DEVELOPER** Ingame Studios
RELEASE March 28 (PC), TBD (PS5, Xbox Series X/S)

FORZA MOTORSPORT

Speeding down the straightaway

Since the last Forza Motorsport title launched in 2017, we've received two entries in Playground Games' critically acclaimed spin-off series, Forza Horizon. That subseries, which emphasizes its open worlds, freedom to do anything, and sometimes zany missions, has leveled up so much that some wondered how the mainline Motorsport games could keep up. With the simply named Forza Motorsport, flagship developer Turn 10 Studios hopes to answer that question.

During a recent Xbox Developer Direct presentation, we got an in-depth look at the impressive new entry in the series. Built from the ground up for Xbox Series X/S hardware, Turn 10 calls this entry "a generational leap ahead for the Forza Motorsport series." For the first time in series history, Forza Motorsport has fully dynamic time of day and weather, which impact how cars handle; track temperatures and surface conditions combine with the texture of the driving surface to ensure that each lap is distinct.

These races take place over 20 environments with multiple track layouts available at launch. Fans can expect their favorites from past Forza Motorsport titles – including Maple Valley, Laguna Seca, and Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps – as well as five all-new locations. One of those debuting locations is Kyalami, the first South African location in Forza Motorsport history. Players can also travel to the base of Mt. Fuji to race at Circuit Hakone in Japan.

By utilizing photogrammetry and laser-scanned images, the development studio can depict 10 times the level of detail compared to past games. Environments feature more detailed vegetation and overgrowth, plus tens of thousands of fully 3D animated spectators to truly bring these races to life in all new ways.

Of course, the stars of the show will always be the cars, and Forza Motorsport also offers a lot in that regard. At launch, the game features more than 500 real-world cars.

Each is customizable using more than 800 unique upgrades and modifications. Each vehicle features a level of detail beyond what nearly any player will notice, with context-aware damage that is unique to each vehicle, down to what kind of paint is currently applied and where air flows, and where dirt would realistically accumulate on each vehicle and aftermarket part.

Paint even peels away based on the directionality of the damage, the texture of the surface, and the location of the edges. Advanced physics mechanics also improve the realism in how cars accelerate, brake, and corner. Thanks to special partnerships with Windows Sonic and Dolby Atmos, the cars and their respective modifications also sound better than ever before.

While we've yet to get our hands on this, Forza Motorsport is shaping up to be a technical showcase for Xbox Series X/S and high-end PCs. If the footage we've seen to this point is to be believed, this could very well carry on the series' tradition of being one of the best-looking games on the market. Players can expect to slide into the driver's seat and compete in an all-new online racing mode and single-player career mode when Forza Motorsport arrives at some point this year. **BY BRIAN SHEA** ■

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Racing (Online TBA)
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios **DEVELOPER** Turn 10 Studios **RELEASE** 2023

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UMBER TO BE CALLED
PLEASE WAIT FOR YO

GI MUST PLAY

DEAD SPACE

To remake whole again

Like a necromorph reanimating the dead, Motive Studios has revived Dead Space and made it stronger and more terrifying than before. This renovation of the 2008 horror classic restores it beyond its original glory. The dismemberment-focused gunplay feels great, looks even better, and while other noteworthy changes may not feel as substantial as other remakes, they're welcomed expansions to the existing template. The result is a remake faithfully recapturing the magic of its predecessor while amplifying the elements that made it beloved in the first place.

Dead Space's story centers on engineer Isaac Clarke joining a small team to answer a distress call from the USG *Ishimura*, a massive mining ship designed to "crack" planets and siphon their precious minerals. An outbreak of vicious aliens called necromorphs has ravaged the *Ishimura* by transforming corpses into members. The story from the original is largely intact, but with some key elements either remixed or expanded with greater context based on lore established later in the series. Outside of tightening continuity and adding welcomed background on side characters, these differences don't dramatically alter the story's flow or events. In a welcome change, Isaac now talks, voiced by the same performer who brought him to life in the Dead Space sequels.

The improved presentation turns Dead Space, already a looker in its day, into a gory feast for the eyes. The *Ishimura* and its mutated inhabitants look great, and traversing the blood-stained corridors is even more harrowing thanks to the show-stealing lighting. Whether you're blanketed in pitch darkness with only your weapon's flashlight for illumination or basking in the eerily warm glow of planet Aegis VII orbiting outside a window, the lighting serves as the presentational glue that makes this graphical facelift work. The sound design also deserves a shout-out, offering a fair share of devious audio tricks and new hair-raising necromorph groans and screams.

Combat feels familiar, though the reworked controls are more in line with modern third-person games. The trusty plasma cutter and other weapons pack a satisfying punch. Dismembering limbs is more satisfying and strategic thanks to the new necromorph damage system, in which layers of skin, muscle, and bone fall apart. This system better showcases the damage and exposes weak points.

The wide array of enemy types from the original return in full force, and they're still fun and often challenging to take apart. Using the time-slowing stasis to stop an attack before it connects or using kinesis to pick up and impale necromorphs with stray objects, including their own amputated sharpened limbs, feels as awesome now as it did 14 years ago.

Unless you finished the original game recently or replayed it enough to intimately know its map, the level design changes probably won't leap out. The *Ishimura*'s many rooms and layout remain generally the same but have been expanded. Most notably, you can access certain areas without riding the tram car. This change helps make the ship feel more organically connected. The tram still exists for those who want to quickly travel between sections necromorph-free.

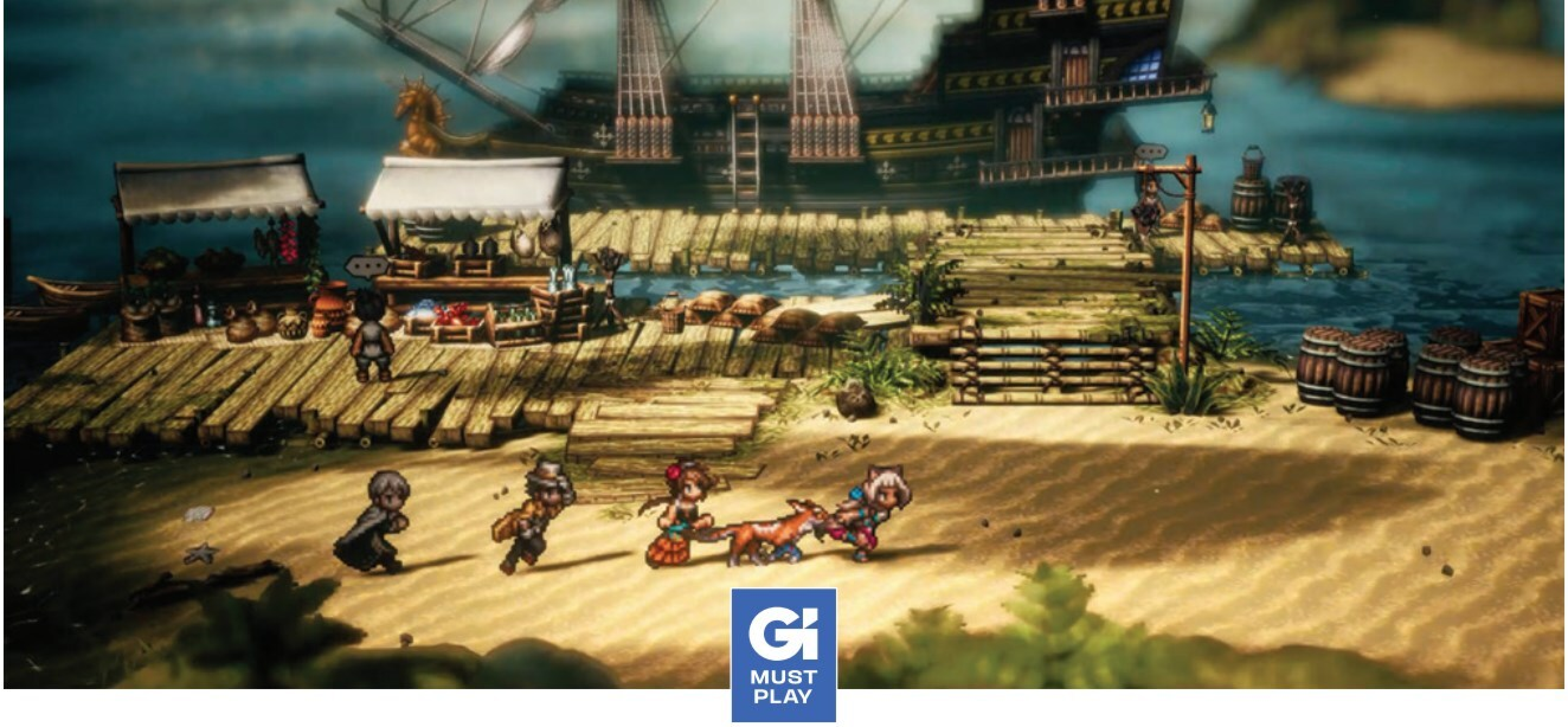
You can now freely revisit areas anytime, but do so at your own peril because necromorphs can reappear in previously cleared zones. These attacks can be the most startling. I love how this system perpetuates Dead Space's tense and unpredictable design outside the main path, making me second-guess my surroundings no matter how many times I step into them.

The prize for revisiting areas is often money, weapon upgrade nodes, and precious ammo. You'll also be making these trips to complete the newly added sidequests. There aren't many of these extra missions, but they generally serve to supplement the lore. One quest delves into the creation of the regenerating Hunter necromorph, for example. Though you largely only find yourself running around the ship's districts in search of specific audio logs or keys, sidequests add a small but tasty sidedish that extends your unfortunate visit.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, Motive made Dead Space look nicer, play better, and preserved the core of the experience. This remake respects and polishes up my memories of Isaac's first encounter with the necromorphs without making me miss the original version. It also acts as the perfect entry point for newcomers since it feels on par with today's titles. I hope this exceptional revision signals to EA that Dead Space has plenty of gas in the tank and becomes a harbinger of more horrifying stories in this universe. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Motive Studio **RELEASE** January 27 **RATING** M



GI MUST PLAY

OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

Two is better than one

In an age where remakes and retro-inspired projects try recreating what classic games of old felt like, Octopath Traveler II accomplishes something impressive. Despite being rooted in modern design with a host of conveniences, it effortlessly captures the spirit, style, and sense of adventure of the best RPGs from the SNES era, while still innovating and showing there's life in turn-based battles yet. The feat is even more remarkable, considering Octopath II's most significant changes are small and subtle.

On the surface, Octopath Traveler II seems like a clone of the original. You pick one of eight adventurers to start with, collect the remaining seven as you go along, and eventually see how their stories connect, albeit somewhat loosely. A series of improvements, including refined storytelling and more complex characters, make Octopath II feel deeper and more exciting, like the fulfillment of what the original game tried to achieve.

Even narrative setups that should be trite have enough nuance to keep them interesting and the characters relatable. Osvald's is your usual tale of revenge, for example, but he's so broken inside that he rarely speaks except in internal monologues. The evil facing Ochette, the happy hunter, is an ancient force that threatens to destroy the world – but also deep-rooted racism against her people.

The characters are deeper, but their actions outside battle are still at odds with the world. You can commit robbery with violence against an entire city and face no consequences, among other things, which gives the impression of an RPG playground instead of a living world.

Combat basics also remain the same, though that's no bad thing. Enemies have weaknesses that, when exploited, reduce their shield points until they break and enter a stunned state. Allies can save boost points and spend them to increase their attack power, and you can mix and match secondary job classes to create powerful hybrid warriors.

While the structure is unchanged, Square Enix made some welcome tweaks to most job classes, including a few new abilities that alter the flow of battle and manage to make combat feel fresh. One of these new improvements is each character's Latent Power, an ability that augments their other skills in powerful ways. Encounters feel better balanced, with a tense rhythm of smart choices timed right, and they don't outstay their welcome.

Grinding to raise levels is easier now, thanks to a day and night system, where stronger monsters emerge at night. It's worth wandering around in the dark anyway, just to see how the world changes.

Octopath II's map is a significant improvement over the original. Square Enix crammed secrets large and small into almost every corner of the continent, and it's always worth tracking them down. For every common treasure and restorative item you find, there's a hidden dungeon, a secret job, or an abandoned village with a fascinating new questline that only appears at night.

Square Enix's HD-2D visual style has grown as a medium, and the evidence is demonstrated through the game's highly detailed environments and layers of interest. It's literally on display as well, as the filter that blurred anything not immediately around you is, thankfully, gone. The result of all this is a gorgeous, rich world that's truly a joy to explore. Octopath Traveler II does what an excellent sequel should. Instead of breaking new ground left and right, it improves on the original in nearly every way and feels more confident about the stories it tells. There's still room for improvement in some of its stiffer areas, but Octopath II is a sterling achievement all around.

BY JOSH BROADWELL

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix, Acquire **RELEASE** February 24 **RATING** T

HOGWARTS LEGACY

A potion well-brewed

MUST PLAY

Capturing the essence of an established fiction is tricky business, especially when translating into a new medium. It's a big reason licensed games frequently miss the mark, sometimes failing to find the tone and nuance that made the original version shine. Avalanche Software navigates those challenges with a deft eye and an evident appreciation for the source books and films. Hogwarts Legacy is a remarkable adventure into the wizarding world of Harry Potter, offering a clever mix of gameplay styles and experiences that keep things fresh for dozens of hours while always maintaining the magical touches that captivate fans.

By setting the game in the 1800s, the developer is able to borrow story elements and locations from later in the timeline, but otherwise tell a new story free of canon constraints. Adopting the role of a witch or wizard of your creation, players arrive at Hogwarts as a new student joining the fifth-year class. Circumstances rapidly develop that challenge you to balance your matriculation with a grand extra-curricular adventure involving dark wizards, dangerous goblins, and an ancient form of lost magic. The storytelling sometimes serves as an excuse to hit big beats players expect, like a triumphant ride on a hippogriff or an amusing excursion through the castle while shapeshifted into a humorous character. If the overarching narrative sometimes feels a little flimsy as a result, it's buoyed by uniformly excellent dialogue and voice acting that carries the action forward, as well as a standout musical score.

A BIGGER PICTURE

Like all our reviews, *Game Informer*'s critical evaluation and scoring of Hogwarts Legacy is based on the game itself, not external factors. However, potential players should be aware of an ongoing conversation around the game's release, stemming from recent inflammatory statements about the trans community by the franchise's original author, J.K. Rowling. Those stances have led to a complex and ongoing debate about the merits of supporting any work derived from the author's original creations, even if she was not directly involved in this game's development. Your buying decisions are your own, and we encourage consideration of the complete picture when determining where you spend your time and money.

From the armor suits that come to attention as you pass to books that fly around like birds waiting to be snatched from the air, Hogwarts is a delightful environment to explore. It's not hard to understand why characters in the books were always getting into trouble outside class; it's nearly impossible not to get distracted from your path to education by a side quest, collectible chase, or other activity. Secret doors and discoveries are everywhere, as are plentiful relationships with the young students and eccentric faculty. That dynamic extends beyond the labyrinthine corridors of the castle to the large open world beyond its grounds. The outdoor environs are filled with beasts to tame, dungeons to tackle, and chances to hop on your broom to zip across the countryside.

A wealth of unique systems and mechanics govern the game's advancement, leading to a mix of exploration, puzzle, and combat gameplay and a satisfying progression of leveling and upgrades. The vast majority of those systems are well-designed and fun, but it means you're still getting tutorials in new game processes, even dozens of hours into play. That works within the fictional framework to some degree; after all, you are a student at a school. But it can make you feel like you're waiting for the full suite of options to open up for far too long.

Combat is exciting, filled with flashy spell effects and fun ways to exploit individual enemy weaknesses. Battle animations are entertaining, making it feel like you're in that life-or-death magic duel or a terrifying confrontation with a troll. Too little enemy variety begins to dim the excitement after a time. Still, I always enjoyed the fights and even the optional stealth routes that sometimes let me avoid the scuffle with a bit of invisibility potion on my side.

I encountered several minor technical issues over the course of my lengthy playthrough, such as pop-in while moving fast or long door-opening loads. And some of the game systems are more successful than others; a flood of useless low-quality gear rewards is one notable, if minor problem that sometimes stalls the fun. But for those who have long wished for a rich interactive playground to live out your own Harry Potter fantasy, Hogwarts Legacy casts an incredibly mesmerizing spell. **BY MATT MILLER**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Portkey Games/Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Avalanche Software
RELEASE February 10 **RATING** T

ATOMIC HEART

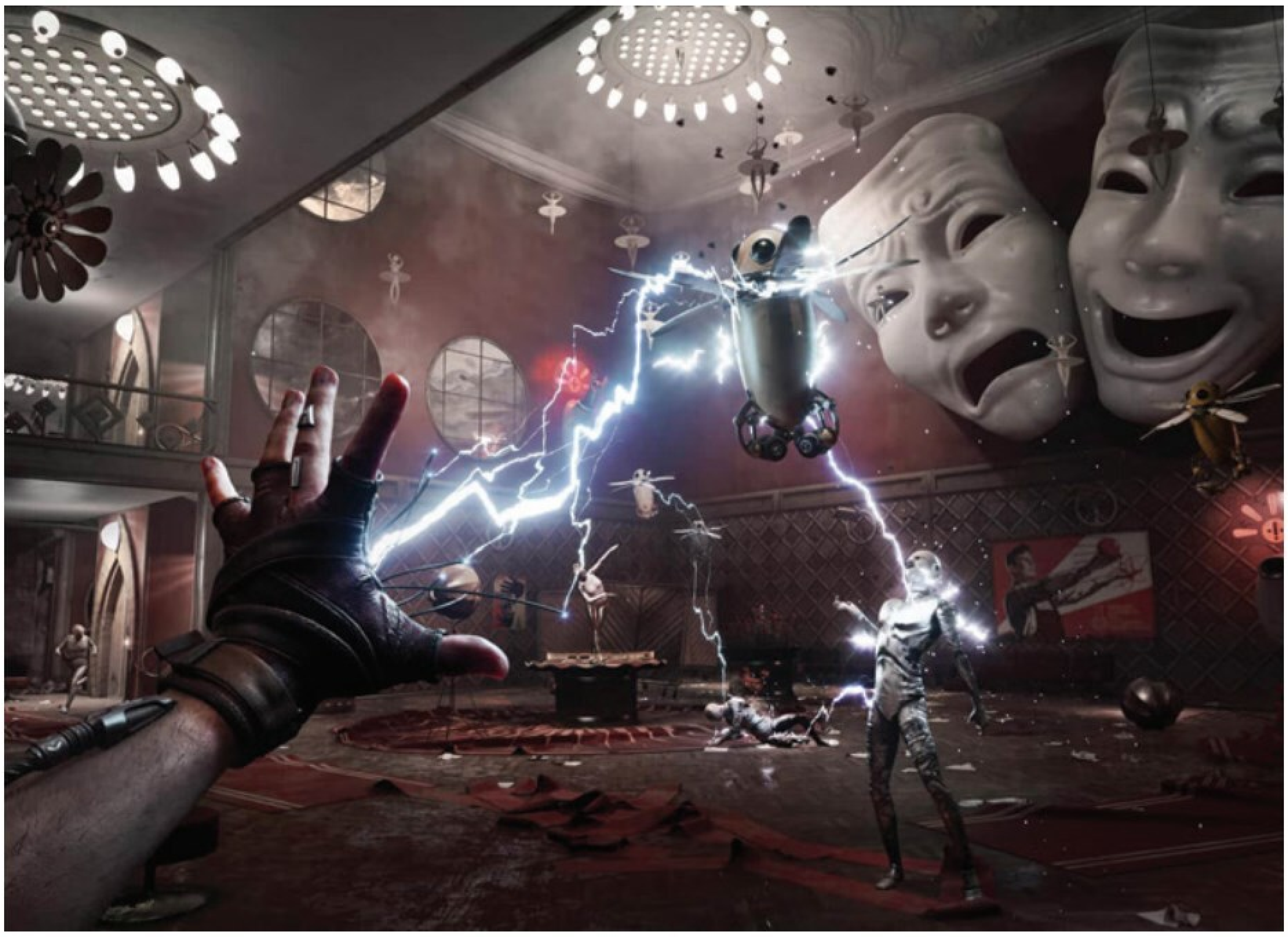
A red rapture

After more than half a decade in development, Atomic Heart has arrived as the first title from developer Mundfish. This BioShock-inspired shooter is an impressive debut in many ways, and it wears its influences on its sleeve – for better and worse. The game's dazzling world design, extraordinary production values, and fast-paced fights make for a solid campaign, but the derivative plot and often painful writing insist on dragging it down.

Atomic Heart's premise is one of its most intriguing elements. The game takes place in an alternate-history Soviet Union that has become the world's foremost superpower after World War II, thanks to the scientific innovations of Facility 3826. The player assumes the role of Agent P-3, an operative under the command of Soviet genius Dr. Dmitry Sechenov. When Sechenov's latest social experiment goes wrong, P-3 is ordered to fight through the Facility's rampaging robots and murderous mutants to reach the truth.

P-3 has access to uniquely upgradable weapons and elemental abilities, but combat is less like BioShock than it may sound. Instead of stealth, hacking, and environmental traps, Atomic Heart demands faster and more reactive shooting to curb the attackers' superior numbers. Enemies have particular weaknesses that can only be exploited with clever combinations, like covering a plant-based mutant with accelerant gel before setting it aflame with incendiary rounds. Battles are both dangerous and satisfying, and the diversity of opponents keeps combat engaging.

The world of Facility 3826 is also gorgeously realized with Atomic Heart's sublime art direction. From the very first scene, the game wows you with its exceptional production values. Meticulous attention to detail is seen in everything from the communist architecture to the internal components of robots, and it really makes the game's what-if scenario seem plausible. The sprawling overworld of the Kazakh mountains also feels large without being empty; plenty of surprising secrets and environmental variety supplement the close-quarters fights and spatial reasoning puzzles of the underground levels.



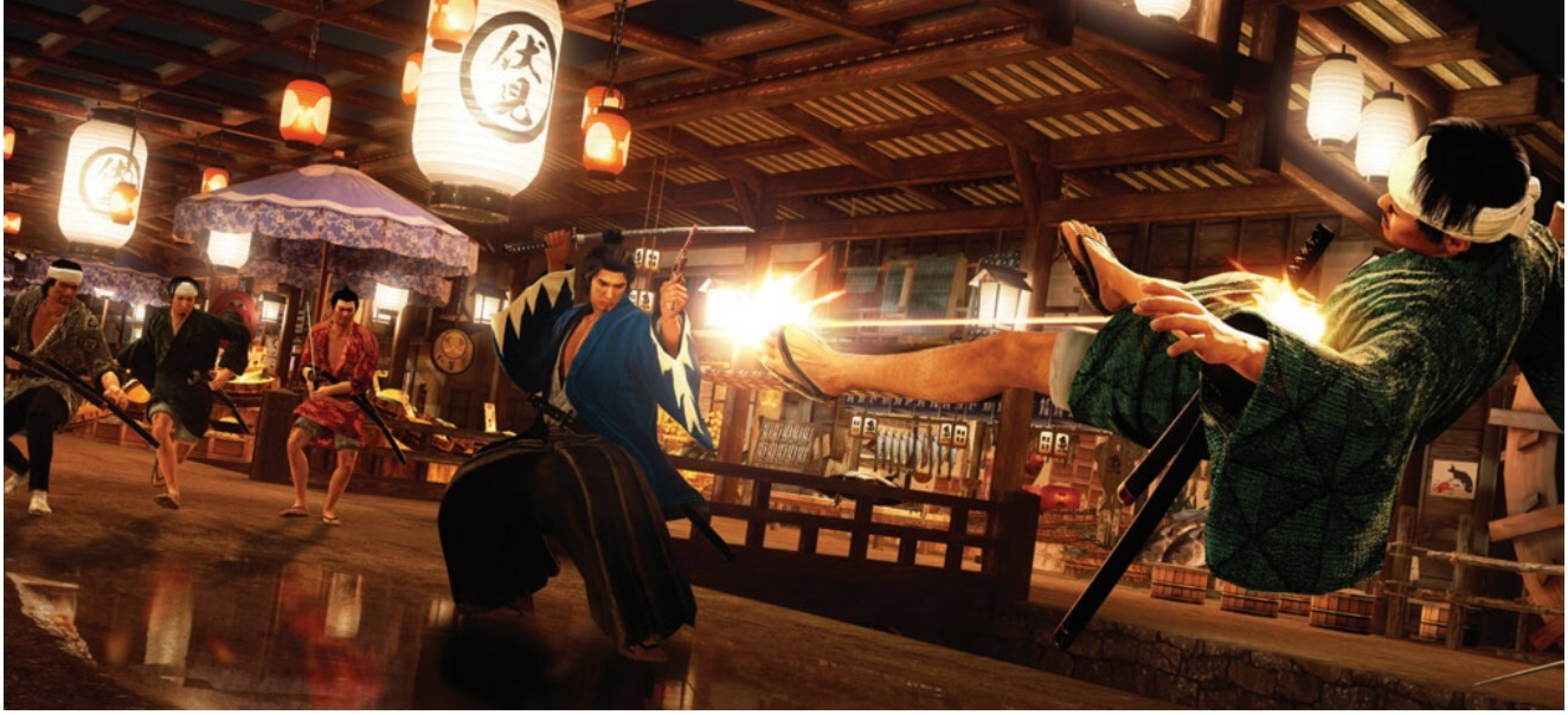
Atomic Heart's biggest problem, however, is its writing. Most of the dialogue ranges from irritating to downright unbearable. P-3 is an angry military man who is constantly yelling, cursing, and using witless sarcasm. He talks a lot – and it's usually to complain about something. His interactions with the sexually frustrated crafting machine are especially painful, and the rest of the cast isn't much better. The script is not provocative; it's just covering up a lack of substantial character development.

Sadly, the actual plot is also a major letdown. Most of it is told through abrupt info-dumps, which quickly erodes any sense of mystery and makes all the events predictable. The story spends much of its time clumsily rehashing many of BioShock's themes with a Soviet spin. Sadly, the best writing is hidden in the various terminals throughout the game, which contain most of the worldbuilding and connect other characters to one another.

On the one hand, Atomic Heart is a good game on its own merits. The fun and frantic gunplay, outstanding visual design, and intricate level of detail in its world amount to an experience worth your time. On the other hand, it could have been so much more. The story and characters simply don't do justice to the game's thought-provoking premise, and better writing would have done wonders. Despite that, Atomic Heart is still an exciting and memorable first outing from Mundfish. **BY CONNOR TRINSKE**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4
Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Mundfish
RELEASE February 21 **RATING** M



LIKE A DRAGON: ISHIN!

A step back in time

Like a Dragon: Ishin is not a new game. It's a remake of an old game – 2014's Ryu Ga Gotoku: Ishin, released only in Japan on the PS3 and PS4. And yet, despite the age of its skeleton, in some ways, the game stands out as one of the more impressive games in developer Ryu Ga Gotoku's (RGG) portfolio – even with a few noticeable weak points.

Ishin takes place in the 1860s, at the end of Japan's Edo period. You play as Sakamoto Ryoma – a real-life historical figure – who, amid his own revenge scheme, finds himself embroiled in the tumultuous socio-political climate of the era. Using the fake alias Saitō Hajime, Sakamoto infiltrates the Shinsengumi, a police force organized to help control Kyoto at this time, searching for the killer of his adopted father. But of course, as these things go, Ryoma ends up in the middle of a much larger plot, impressively finding time to both seek out his revenge and effect great change to the country's entire political system – as one does.

It's a gripping drama, if an unwieldy one at times. Ishin's cast uses the faces and personalities of Yakuza mainstay characters to represent its actual historical figures. For example, Ryoma is series protagonist Kazuma Kiryu, but there's also Goro Majima, Taiga Saejima, and even a few newer characters I won't spoil here. These familiar faces helped me instantly adhere – or despise – characters, as I was already aware of their personality traits. Ishin is also one of the better-written RGG games, with impressively directed cutscenes – some of the best in the studio's catalog – that always kept me engaged.

On the other hand, keeping track of Ishin's ever-twisting story is like trying to balance 100 spinning plates on two hands. The game often expects you to have at least a cursory knowledge of about 100 years of Japanese history on top of following complex narratives. And I don't particularly like the ending, which, without spoilers, gets uncharacteristically meta with a curious message.

Like in other RGG games, substories automatically play when you're close enough to the mission-giver – whether you want them to or not. Luckily, you only have to sit through the introductory cutscenes and not play the entire quest until you want to. But I found it incredibly annoying being sometimes stopped five or more times on my way to one nearby location so every side quest in the area could play out. That's not to say the substories aren't good; they are. I especially enjoyed Ishin's slice-of-life minigames, where you share a house with Haruka, tending crops, learning cooking, raising animals, and so on.

Combat makes up the vast majority of Ishin, and for the most part, it's great. You have four fighting styles, each with its own skill tree, and I like switching between the four continuously mid-combat. I'd often start with the fast-paced sword and gun stance for quick damage and crowd control. I'd then switch to the more deliberate swordsman fighting style for massive damage to singled-out enemies. And occasionally, I'd move to a gun-only stance to damage far-away targets. It's not perfect – the camera often works against you in cramped areas, too many enemies hit you from behind, and one late-game setpiece level is frustratingly annoying – but when it works, Ishin's combat is greatly satisfying.

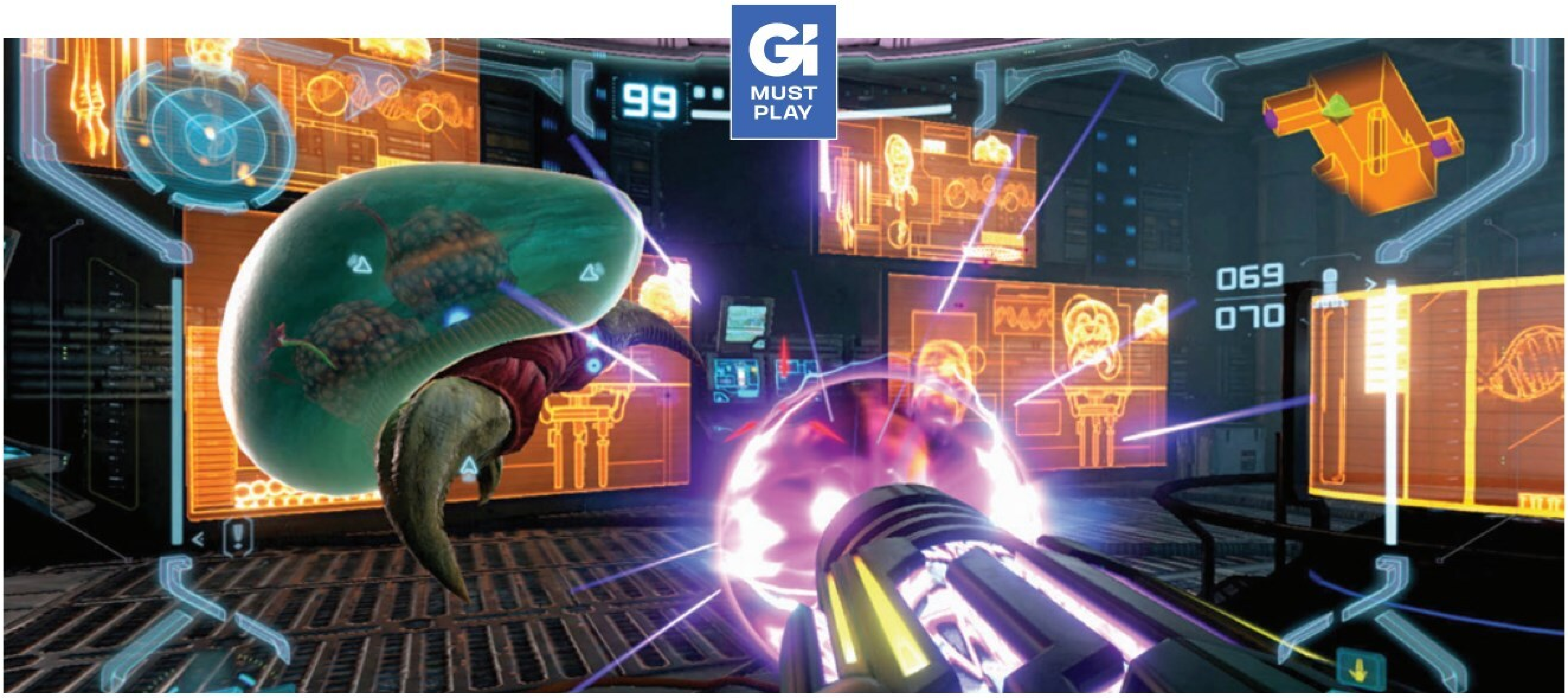
Like a Dragon: Ishin is an awesome spin-off and one I'm glad finally came to the States. Even if it tripped on the landing, the story kept me gripped, and I hope some of the new combat styles make their way to other RGG games. I also hope we'll get the other spin-offs that never made their way over. Time will tell, but for now, it's nice to be back with my favorite criminals. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **RELEASE** February 21 **RATING** M

METROID PRIME REMASTERED

A modernized masterpiece



Metroid Prime has long been considered one of the crowning achievements of Nintendo's GameCube library. The series' seamless transition to the first-person genre was defined by its frenetic action, massively explorable environments, clever puzzles, and daunting boss encounters. However, the subsequent two decades have worn on the original release, but much like Samus by the end of each game, Metroid Prime Remastered brings the title back to full power.

Metroid Prime Remastered takes the already-stellar original title and gives it a shiny coat of paint; I'm struck by how well the art style of Metroid Prime translates to modern visuals. Meticulously detailed textures and vastly improved lighting further accentuate the already beautiful character models and environments. Even the sound is better, making the excellent soundtrack that much more enjoyable.

The visual improvements are noteworthy, but the modernized controls are downright revelatory. This version of Metroid Prime offers various control settings to allow you to play how you want. Classic and Pointer controls, meant to emulate the single-stick GameCube and motion-control Wii settings, respectively, play to nostalgia. However, the new Dual Stick option is the best way to play Metroid Prime.

This setting (the default) maps movement to the left stick and aiming to the right in the most effective control modernization I can recall. This new control scheme makes almost zero concessions in its updates; the best compliment I can give is that my modern first-person shooter brain instinctually knew how to do almost every action with minimal tutorials or guidance. When combined with the lock-on system of Samus' suit, this game delivers the amazing power fantasy of being one of the galaxy's ultimate bounty hunters.

With these improvements in tow, Metroid Prime Remastered opens the doors for a new audience to experience one of the greatest Nintendo exclusives of the 21st century. Exploring Tallon IV is an eerie and atmospheric delight; the original development team at Retro Studios clearly understood how to transpose Metroid's established formula of obtaining new powers to aid in thoughtful exploration of an ever-expanding map to an all-new genre. Throw in memorable boss fights, stellar environmental storytelling, and exciting combat encounters and Metroid Prime's superb design still feels awesome.

I emerged from revisiting of Metroid Prime with only minor complaints. The unwieldy camera when you're in Morph Ball, the lack of a real waypoint system, and the cluttered HUD show the game's age, but are minuscule issues in the grand scheme of this remarkable remaster. Even the antiquated checkpoint system and the abundance of backtracking are little more than nitpicks and add to the tension without feeling cheap.

Metroid Prime Remastered is more than meets the eye, serving as a testament to how spectacular and timeless the original design was. The visual and performance improvements go a long way in making it more approachable, but paramount to those upgrades is the fact that it controls as well as nearly any other shooter on the Switch today. Metroid Prime was a masterpiece in 2002, and that assessment still rings true in 2023.

BY BRIAN SHEA

9.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Retro Studios
RELEASE February 8 **RATING** T

HORIZON CALL OF THE MOUNTAIN

The smaller parts of the game, fighting robots, making items, and looking around, are highlights. Pulling yourself up a mountain isn't, and that's where you spend most of the approximately six-hour experience. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

6.75

PLATFORM PSVR2 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER PlayStation Studios
DEVELOPER Firesprite Ltd, Guerrilla Games
RELEASE February 22 **RATING** T

COLOSSAL CAVE

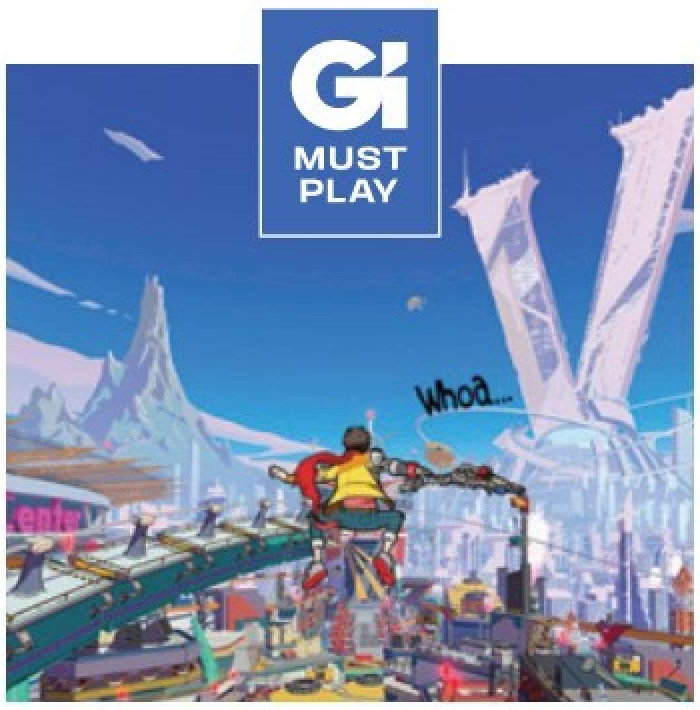
Colossal Cave isn't for everyone, but it's like a slow and meticulously designed theme park ride, all built around an old text adventure game, making for a fascinating experience. **BY JUNO RAMONA STUMP**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PSVR2
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Cygnus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Cygnus Entertainment
RELEASE January 19 (PS5, Switch, PC), 2023
(Xbox Series X/S, PSVR2, PS4, Xbox One)
RATING E10+

HI-FI RUSH

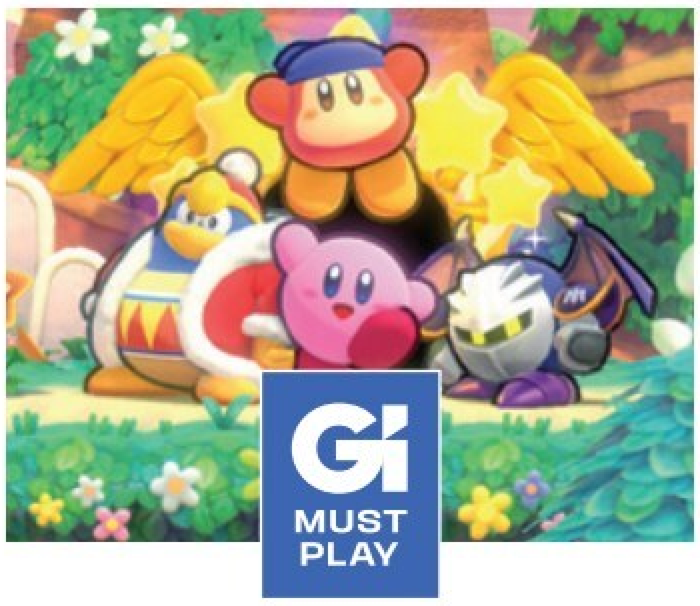
MUST PLAY



Hi-Fi Rush finds a magical sweet spot between rhythm games, stylish action, and lighthearted, character-driven platformers we don't see very often anymore, and by every measure, it comes out on top. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

8.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player
Action/Rhythm **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Tango Gameworks
RELEASE January 25 **RATING** T



MUST PLAY

KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

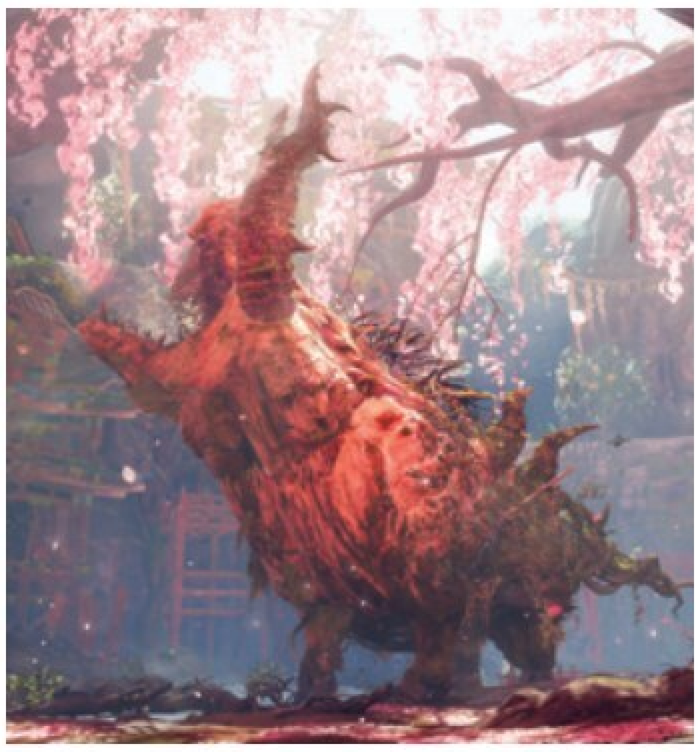
Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe is an enhanced remaster of a 12-year-old Wii game, but it effectively brings forward one of the pink puffball's best outings, complete with meaningful additions. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.75

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action/
Platforming **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER HAL Laboratory
RELEASE February 24 **RATING** E10+

WILD HEARTS

A stronger story would have been welcome, and the camera leaves much to be desired, but Wild Hearts is a deeply engaging experience even with these faults.
BY LOUIS LIVINGSTON-GARCIA



8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Koei Tecmo
RELEASE February 17 **RATING** T

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE COSMIC SHAKE

It's a game I recommend to fans of SpongeBob SquarePants with ease; for those looking for a great platformer, though, better options lie elsewhere in the sea.
BY WESLEY LEBLANC ■

7

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Platforming
PUBLISHER THQ Nordic **DEVELOPER** Purple Lamp
RELEASE January 31 **RATING** E10+

THE AGE OF NOSTALGIA

How fans are “demaking” modern games with a retro twist

BY AIDAN MOHER

It’s 2023, and we’re deep in the age of remakes and remasters. From Suikoden revivals to big budget remakes of Final Fantasy VII and Silent Hill 2, and endless rereleases of Skyrim, gaming is obsessed with its legacy. We’ve even got remasters of remakes – like 2015’s Resident Evil HD Remaster, a multi-console remaster of the 2002 GameCube remake of Resident Evil.

Now, instead, picture this:

It’s 1996, and you’re deep into a Saturday night of gaming. You spill your Snapple as you leap from your bean bag chair. You’ve finally defeated Malenia, Blade of Miquella in Elden Ring. Heart’s pounding, you’re exhausted. You save. Power down your Super Nintendo and TV. The glow of the CRT winks out as your Game Boy flicks on and you wind down with a little Kirby and the Forgotten Land.

Welcome to the Age of Demakes.

A De…make?

As new console generations push visuals and technical prowess, games are marching out of the uncanny valley, and reaching stylized heights that match the efforts of Hollywood. Gaming is obsessed with bigger, prettier, and faster. At the same time, there are millions of fans reaching middle age, and, just like their parents did when they rebought their vinyl album collection in 2001, they're looking to recapture childhood nostalgia.

Remakes are a popular way to let modern gamers revisit classics. They take something old and make it new again. Nostalgia arrives with a new coat of paint and a revved up engine under the hood. So, what the heck is a "demake?"

It's simple, says Luke from England, who's better known by his online handle: 2bitcrook. "A demake is old, and a remake is new." Remakes are typically large affairs, he elaborates. "What would developers at the time have made if they'd had ample resources, unlimited time, and no limit on technology?" But, for 2bitcrook, who runs Game Boy Demakes, it's more interesting to ask, "What would a game look like if it hurtled through time to a system which can display [only four] colors on a [tiny] screen?"

Perhaps the most visible example of an official demake is Blizzard's World of Warcraft Classic. Launched in 2019, Classic brought players back to the past with a faithful recreation of 2004's original World of Warcraft – complete with all the tedium of a genre figuring out how to let millions of players adventure together. Classic presented an opportunity for longtime players to test the theory that the good ol' days really were as great as they remembered.

"The Classic journey has been a bit of a roller coaster," says Casey Gibson, host of *Talk Nintendo Podcast* and longtime World of Warcraft fan. "But overall, it's been a pleasure."

What's fascinating about a decades-old MMO, he continues, is seeing how much the game's design has changed as expansions and patches have piled up. "Many refer to the original release and the two follow-up expansions [2007's The Burning Crusade and 2008's Wrath of the Lich King] as the golden era of World of Warcraft," Gibson says. "Each expansion brought new features aimed at making the game more accessible, but at the expense of the feeling of community."

Fans long clamored for a return to Gibson's "golden era," but how much of their enthusiasm was based on genuine experience, and how much was instead rose-tinted nostalgia? Did fans really want to go back?

Gibson recalls ex-president of Blizzard J. Allen Brack once responding to this very question with "You think you do, but you don't." But, Gibson continued, Classic's success disproved this pessimism. It boasts 27 million total players, according to *MMO Populations*. "It's easy to think that

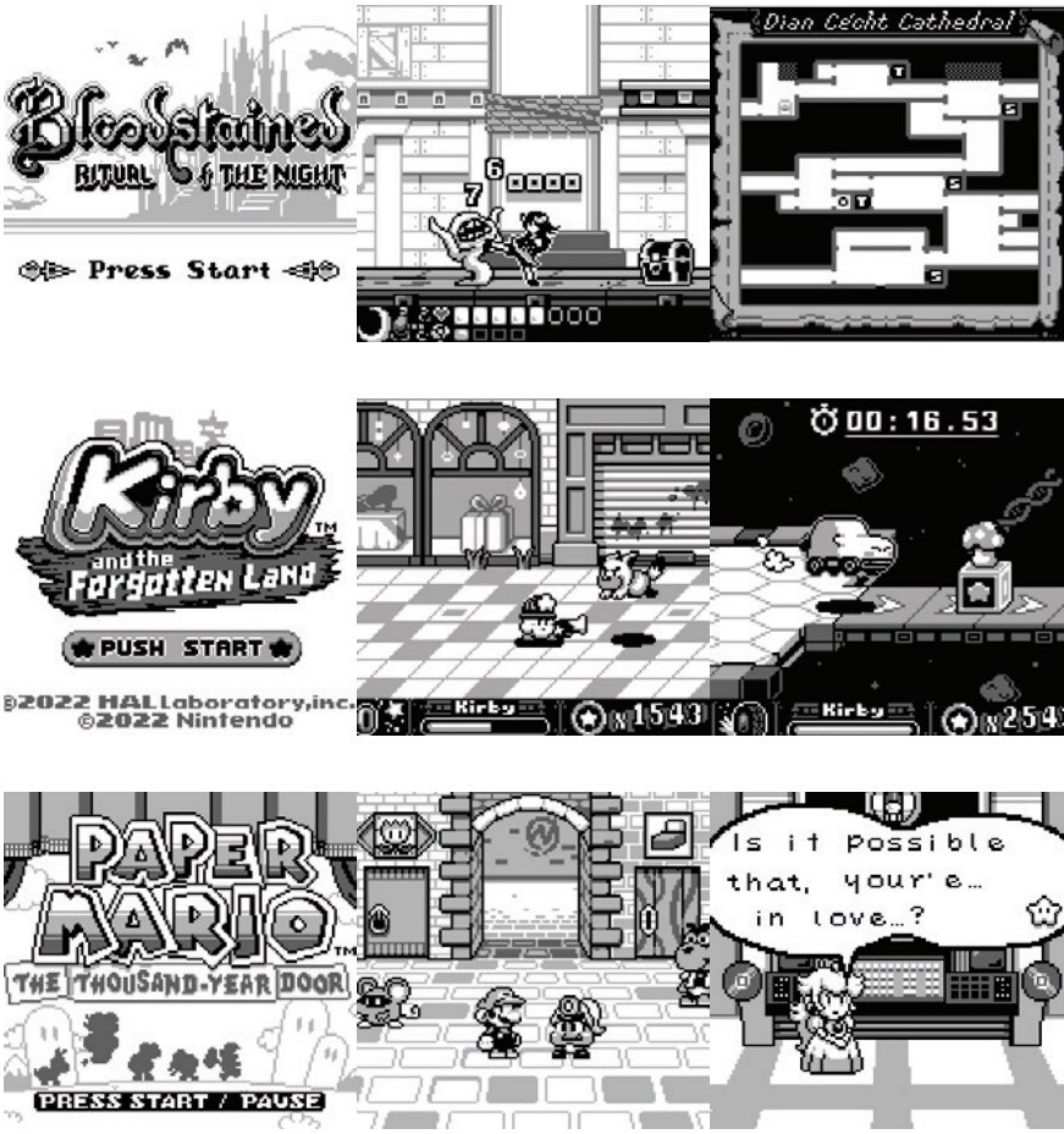
World of Warcraft Classic ↖

the yearning for yesteryear is due to rose-colored glasses, but having gone back, I don't think that is the case," Gibson says.

But Classic only takes the demake concept so far since it's mimicking a game that once existed. Take Square Enix's Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age for example. It was the long-running series' HD debut on PlayStation 4. It was also a 3DS game featuring the handheld's trademark chunky polygons and low-res textures, and a classic Super NES-style JRPG. It was *all* those at once.

Initially released in Japan for the PlayStation 4 and Nintendo 3DS, Dragon Quest XI was made three separate times by Square Enix, each calling on a golden era from the franchise's history, and letting players experience the story in their favorite visual style. It was a remake, demake, and new game all at once. Dragon Quest has always respected its past – choosing iteration over wholesale reinvention – but few games in the series are in conversation with the past quite so much as XI.

Official demakes like World of Warcraft Classic and Dragon Quest XI – whether they're old experiences brought back to life, or official retro versions of modern games – are still rare from major publishers. But thanks to growing interest from fans, indie and hobbyist developers have taken it upon themselves to rewind the clock on modern gaming, and the games, mockups, and trailers they're making are taking social media by storm.



↘

2bitcrook's demakes (Top: Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night, Middle: Kirby and the Forgotten Land, Bottom: Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door)

Fandominance

From their studio in The Netherlands, Neils Koper and Neils Beekes, who together form 64 Bits, are known for their demakes of games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Mass Effect, and Elden Ring. The appeal is mostly nostalgia, says Koper.

There are different types of demakes, each of which appeals in unique ways. 64 Bits' demakes are exclusively trailers – highly detailed, but non-interactive. Some, like 2bitcrook's Game Boy demakes, are playable on original hardware and offer a semi-interactive experience. Lilith Walther's Bloodborne PSX aims to provide a multi-hour game experience that feels like it came straight from 1999.

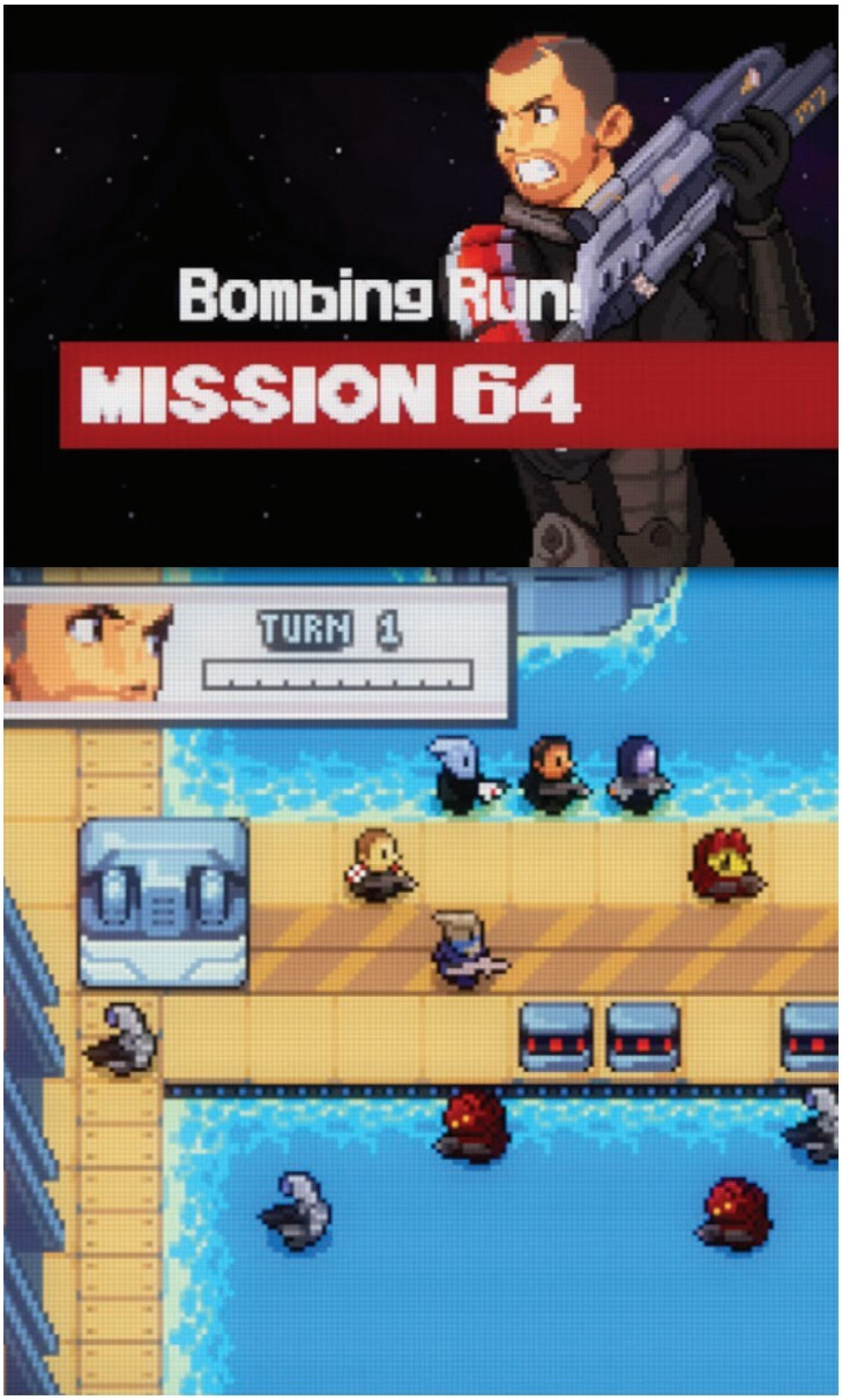
Walther had always wanted to make games, so she continued to work on personal projects on the side of her day job in VR gaming, buoyed by applications like Blender and Unreal Engine. The most prominent was a low-poly take on From Software's modern classic, Bloodborne.

A big fan of the 2015 PlayStation 4 game, Walther wondered what Bloodborne might've been like had it come out on Sony's first PlayStation. She wanted to make it not only playable but a multi-hour experience with unique content and a new ending. She aimed for something that would feel right at home among late '90s action RPGs.

"I specifically redesigned not just the graphics but also the gameplay to match older games," Walther says. She rolled back quality-of-life features, simplified combat and exploration, reduced character animations – and, in doing so, discovered a beauty in the creative confines of older technology.

As a gamer entering his 40s, I enjoy playing older games to not only experience them with 20 years of context, allowing me to appreciate their impact on gaming history, but also for that hit of nostalgia. I love being swept back to the glow of a CRT and the latest Super NES game making its rounds through my friends.

Beekes wants to bottle up that feeling, to help viewers revisit the immersive *je ne sais quoi* of playing games on their living room tube TV – a feeling lost on a lot of younger fans. So, 64 Bits' Elden Ring demake video intentionally mimics the look of a Super NES game on an old Trinitron TV, complete with scanlines and a phosphor glow effect. "I remember the smell," Beekes says with a hint of wistfulness. "The smell of the static electricity."



↙
64bit's Mass Effect demake

He couldn't replicate that smell, or the feel of the hair on your arm rising as you brushed past the TV, but the rest was possible, adding an era-appropriateness for older fans. And for younger fans, a glimpse at how far we've come over the past couple of decades.

Demakes like those from Walther, 2bitcrook, and 64 Bits provide a window into an alternate universe where technology stagnated, but games continued to push the creative boundaries of familiar hardware.

Gotta Demake 'Em All

Demakes have been shared online for years now, with creators like 98Demake popularizing the concept in viral videos like 2017's "If The Last Of Us was made in 1998." As fan interest has increased, we've seen demakes of many different titles, including 64 Bits' Paper Mario-style Zelda compilation and 2bitcrook's Kirby and the Forgotten Land. But with so many great games out there, how do creators choose which game to tackle? It's a little different each time, they all say.

"It tends to hit me like a thunderbolt," says 2bitcrook. He'll be struck by inspiration, then set up a Patreon poll with a few game choices. "It's exciting to put the fate of a demake into others' hands," he says, but admits he tilts the board a bit by only including his best ideas.

Walther has always been fascinated by the PlayStation's visuals, and Bloodborne seemed like an obvious choice because it felt akin to the older generations when games were less prone to handholding. "Souls games in general have this very old design feeling," she says. "The awkward lock-on mechanic in combat, a limited number of voice clips, you're running around collecting keys for locked doors. It was a natural fit."

Similarly, the 64 Bits team chooses based on a combination of personal taste and desire to experiment with new art styles. Beekes and Koper specifically chose the Super NES for Elden Ring because they wanted to add pixel art to their portfolio. They've long been fans of action-based JRPGs on that system like Terranigma, a Japan- and Europe-only release from Enix that provided the template for their Elden Ring remake.

At first, Koper wanted to make it in the style of The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. "I wanted to make it cute," he says. "But, we talked it over and decided to give it a more gritty feel."

"It needed to be a demake that's actually based on something dark," says Beekes. Terranigma offered not only that darker tone but also a more fluid foundation for their video's combat. "We wanted it to have free-flowing, fluid motion, and for the player to be able to walk in all directions, dodge monsters, and stuff like that. Especially because Elden Ring had really big bosses."

Tools of the Trade

You don't need an old Net Yaroze or a Super NES development kit to make demakes. Instead, the creators we spoke with use tools ranging from Photoshop and After Effects to Unity, Microsoft Paint, GB studio (a user-friendly application designed to let people create their own Game Boy games), and Unreal Engine – many of the same applications used to make modern games.

For 2bitcrook, the workflow starts by replaying a "good hefty chunk" of the original title or "watching one of the most valuable resources in modern game design: let's plays!" He collects reference images and knows he's hit the jackpot if he can also find documents with original notes from the game's directors or artists. "I'll try to get a feel for the game's soul," he says, adding his desire to capture the creator's original intent and the eventual relationship created by the game and its fans. "It's about doing the source material justice."

Because 64 Bit's demakes are all videos – like sizzle reels for long-lost retro titles – Beekes and Koper don't use any game development tools at all, relying instead on Photoshop and After Effects to create assets and animate their videos. Walther uses a suite of applications familiar to modern game developers: she creates models in Blender, referencing in-game assets from the original Bloodborne, creates pixel art textures for her polygonal world in Photoshop, and then codes everything in Unreal Engine 4.

Back to the Future

Demakes are all about looking to the past for inspiration, but that doesn't mean they don't have a bright future. Tools like Game Boy Studio and Blender – both of which are free and open source – make game development more accessible than ever for a generation of creators and fans who grew up inspired by older consoles.

"I believe it's catching on, especially with the influx of not only Game Boy enthusiasts being able to use Game Boy Studio, but also the nostalgic boom of [low poly styles]," says 2bitcrook before praising Walther's work on Bloodborne PSX, which he calls "faithful and wonderful."

2bitcrook admits he dreams of a day when big publishers recognize there's a market for retro experiences, but stresses it's still just a dream. "Remaking and rebooting games is a valid option," he says. "But if they wanted to give their IPs to hobbyist devs to demake, something to cut their teeth on without worrying about designing an entire game from scratch, well… who knows?"

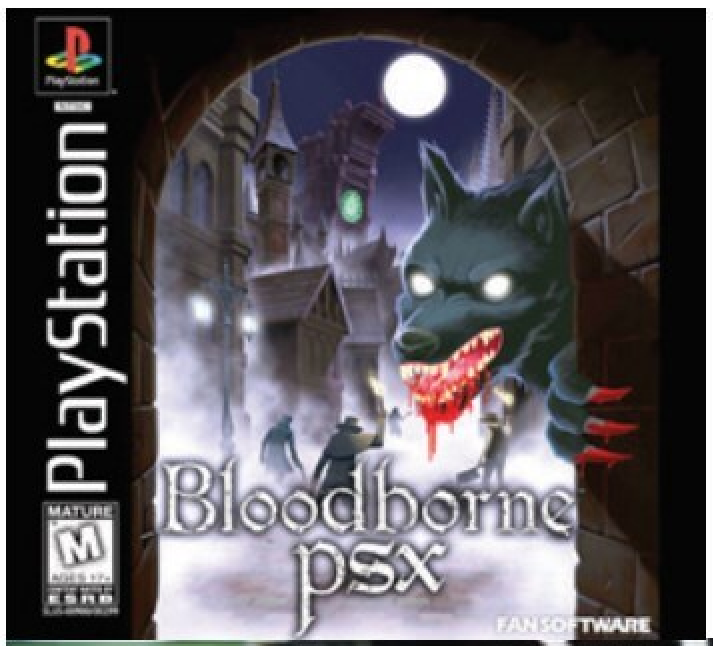
As video games continue to mature, they're going to have an ever-larger and more widely respected legacy to draw on. With games like World of Warcraft Classic and Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age proving the market for official, big-budget demakes, and growing interest from fans, it feels like we're only scratching the surface of the movement's potential. And thanks to direct-to-creator payment platforms like Patreon and open source tools, grassroots efforts like those from Walther, 2bitcrook, and 64 Bits have thrived in a way that wouldn't have been possible a decade ago. So, grab your rose-colored glasses, slide into some neon spandex, and pop that power button on your CRT, because the journey's only just getting started. ■

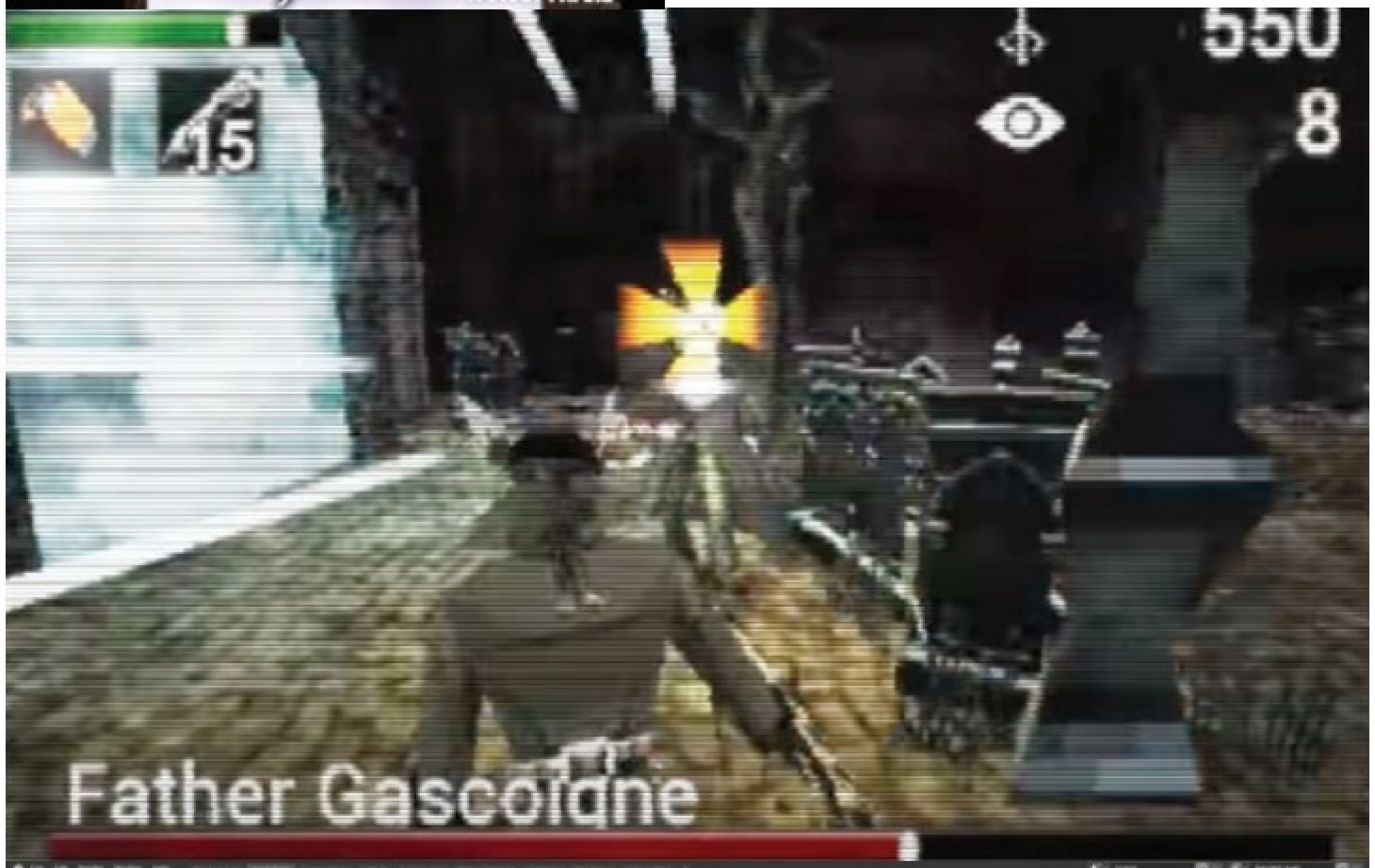
BUT, WHAT ABOUT COPYRIGHT?

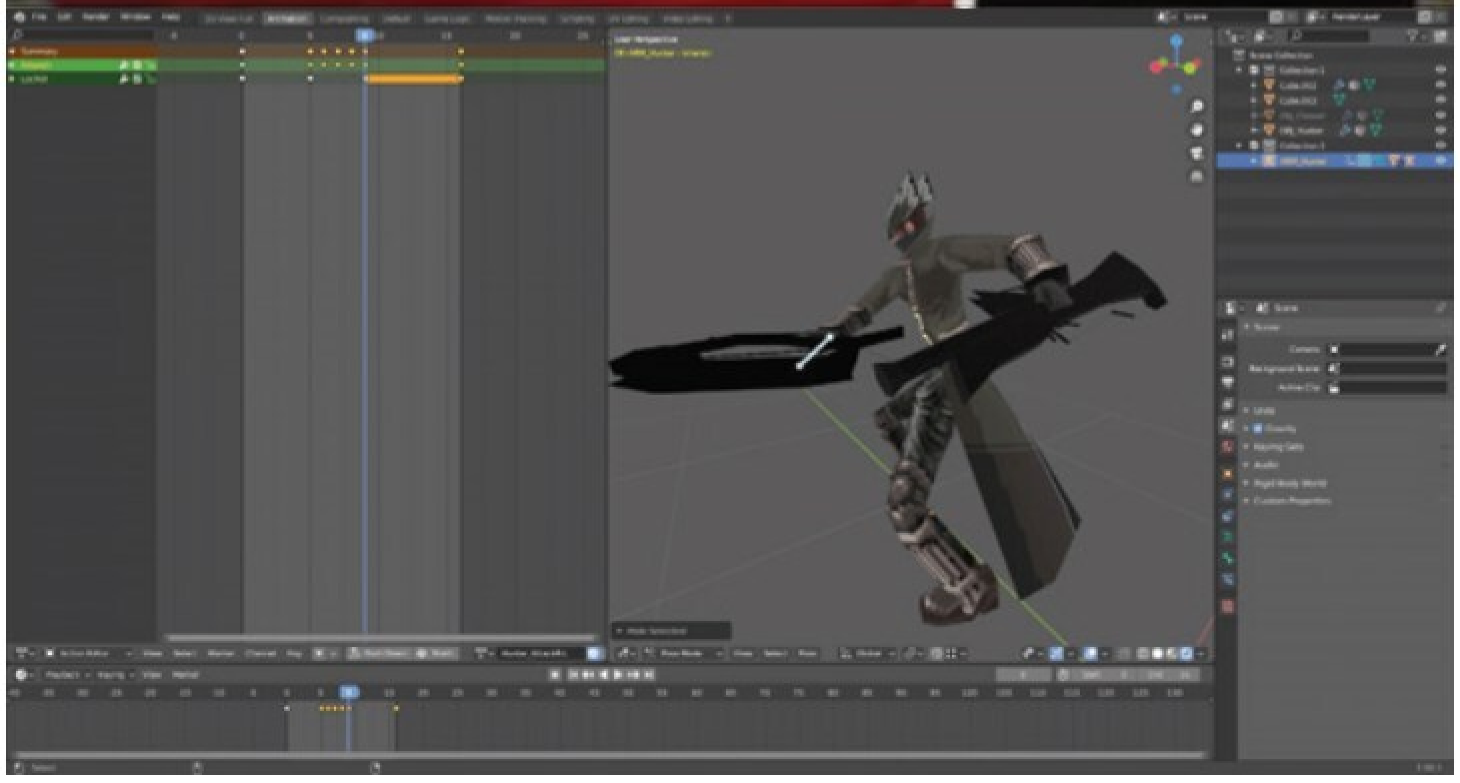
That's a great question, especially since Nintendo is notorious for DMCA (The Digital Millennium Copyright Act) takedowns of popular YouTube content using its copyrighted material. So, how do these creators navigate the complex balance of respecting copyright and practicing fair use?

"We did actually get a copyright takedown from The Pokémon Company for Detective Pikachu Noir," says Neils Beekes, who makes up one half of 64 Bits, an animation studio known for its demake videos. "Which broke us because it was nine months of work. But, luckily, we appealed, and one month later we got it back."

64 Bits' basic approach is simple: "We don't make it into a game; it's just a video pretending to be it." By focusing on a different format and unique art – while also avoiding logos and specific game names – 64 Bits toes the line between celebration and legally questionable infringement. Outside of Nintendo and Pokémon, some game creators are honored by the celebration of their work, Beekes says. "For example, Santa Monica Studios and director Cory Barlog tweeted about how awesome our PS1 demake of God of War was!"







Lilith Walther's Bloodborne demake ↗

ONE LAST THING

SPRING AND SUMMER GAMING

The snow is melting, flowers are blooming, and soon it will be beach season. But why would you want to go outside when all these games will be releasing?

APRIL

☐ GrimGrimoire OnceMore *(PS5, PS4, Switch) – 4/4*
☐ Meet Your Maker *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 4/4*
☐ Tron: Identity *(Switch) – 4/11*
☐ Mega Man Battle Network Legacy Collection *(PS4, Switch, PC) – 4/14*
☐ Minecraft Legends *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 4/18*
☐ Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores *(PS5) – 4/19*
☐ Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp *(Switch) – 4/21*
☐ Dead Island 2 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 4/21*
☐ Star Wars Jedi: Survivor *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 4/28*

MAY

☐ Age of Wonders 4 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 5/2*
☐ Redfall *(Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 5/2*
☐ Darkest Dungeon II *(PC) – 5/8*
☐ The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom *(Switch) – 5/12*
☐ Amnesia: The Bunker *(Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 5/16*
☐ Endless Dungeon *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Switch, PC) – 5/18*
☐ Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 5/26*

JUNE

☐ Street Fighter 6 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, PC) – 6/2*
☐ Diablo IV *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 6/6*
☐ Final Fantasy XVI *(PS5) – 6/22*
☐ Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC) – 6/27*

JULY

☐ The Legend of Heroes: Trails into Reverie *(PS5, PS4, Switch, PC) – 7/7*
☐ Pikmin 4 *(Switch) – 7/21*
☐ Disney Illusion Island *(Switch) – 7/28*

For a comprehensive list of upcoming releases, including games with release dates yet to be finalized, visit GameInformer.com/2023 ■

STAR WARS

Geeknet Star Wars Darth Vader Wired Gaming Keyboard (GameStop Exclusive)
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SKU 328169

Geeknet Star Wars Darth Vader Wired MMO RGB Gaming Mouse (GameStop Exclusive)
SKU 328176

Geeknet Star Wars Darth Vader 40mm Driver Wired Gaming Headset (GameStop Exclusive)
SKU 328091

STAR WARS
THE BOOK OF BOBA FETT

Geeknet Star Wars Boba Fett Wired Gaming Keyboard (GameStop Exclusive)
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Geeknet Star Wars Boba Fett XXL RGB Mouse Pad (GameStop Exclusive)
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